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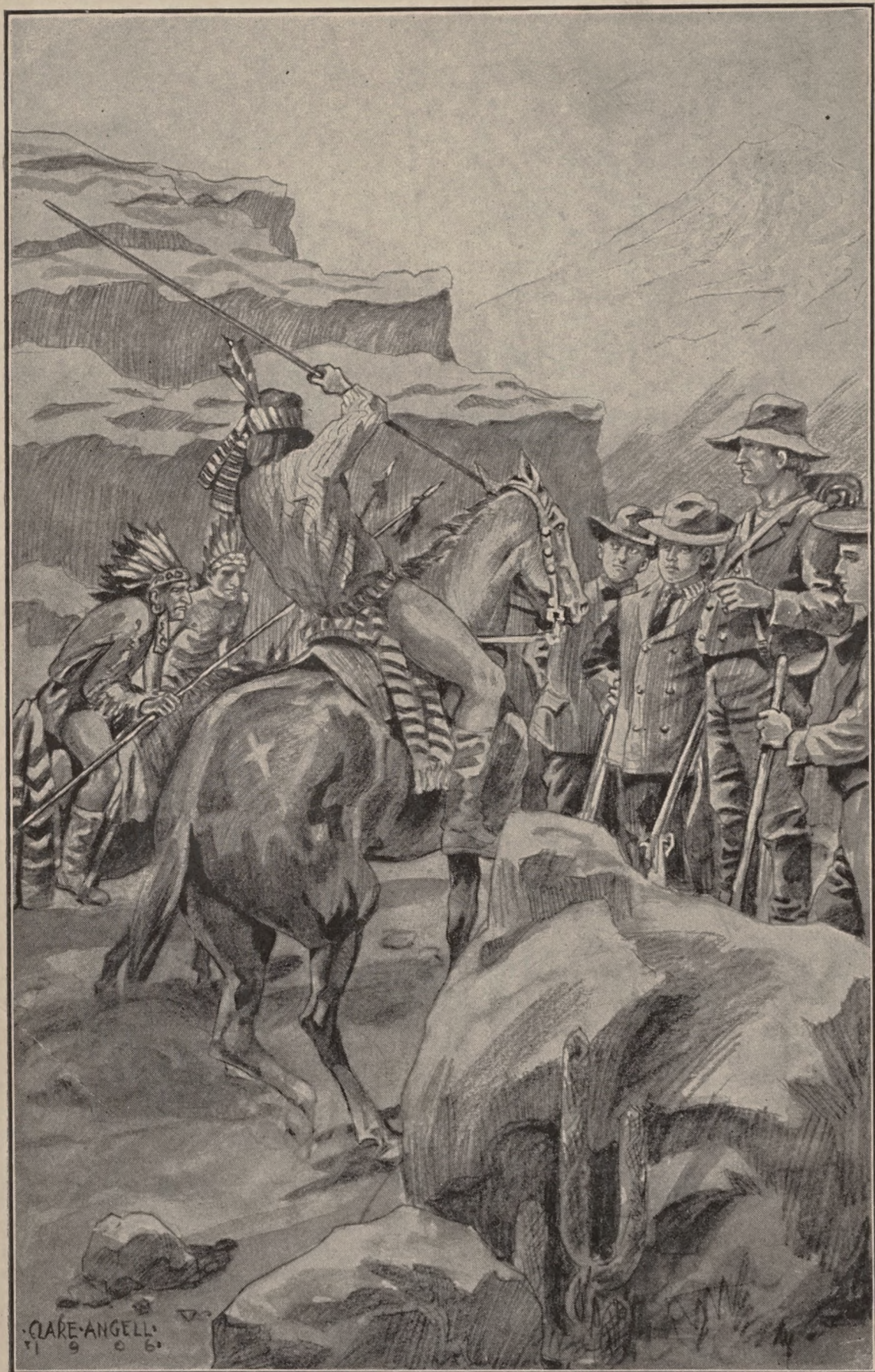
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THEY WERE JUST ABOUT TO PROCEED WHEN THREE INDIANS RODE UP.

Pioneer Boys of the Gold Fields—Frontispiece

—P. 144.

PIONEER BOYS OF THE GOLD FIELDS

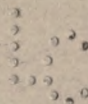
OR

THE NUGGET HUNTERS OF '49

BY

CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL

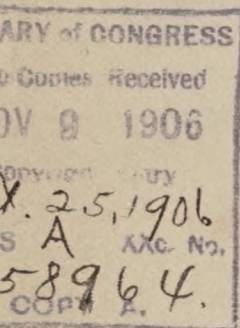
AUTHOR OF "PIONEER BOYS OF THE GREAT NORTHWEST,"
"WITH BOONE ON THE FRONTIER," "FLAG OF
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Pioneer Boys of the Gold Fields.

PREFACE

"PIONEER BOYS OF THE GOLD FIELDS" relates the adventures of three sturdy youths who go west to seek their fortune during the great rush to California in 1849.

At the start the boys are unknown to each other—one coming from the city, another from the country, while a third is just home from a long whaling voyage. But the magic word, "Gold!" is on every lip, and in company with thousands of others, they make the long and perilous journey across the plains and the mountains, to the Land of Promise. On the way they have several encounters with wild beasts and with Indians,—scenes taken from actual life. When the gold diggings are reached they find that a great deal of hard labor lies before them, but they do not shirk, and their success is well deserved. They find the gold fields overrun with bad men, and at the height of their prosperity they are robbed of their treasure. What happens after that, the pages which follow relate in detail.

In writing this story the author has had but one purpose in view—to give his readers a faithful picture of the exciting times of '49, when rich and poor, high and low, laborers and bankers, journeyed by land or by water to California in search of gold. The excitement was intense, equaled only by that when gold was first discovered in the Klondyke region. In those days there were no railroads across the western portion of our country, and the journey had to be made on foot or on horseback and took months where it now takes but days. Those who did not go by land sailed either to the Isthmus of Panama, crossed, and went up the coast of California by ship, or else took the still longer voyage around Cape Horn. Surely the hearts of these Argonauts were of the stoutest, and their deeds deserved to be chronicled!

CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL.

August 15, 1906.

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PIONEER BOYS OF THE GOLD FIELDS

CHAPTER I

~~MARK~~ AND HIS DIFFICULTIES

"I WONDER if this report can be true, Carl?"

"What report, Mark?"

"This report in the newspapers that great nuggets of gold are to be found in California," replied Mark Radley. He pointed to the sheet he had been perusing. "Here is an account of a miner picking up ten thousand dollars' worth of nuggets in two days, and another account of a gold hunter washing out six thousand dollars' worth of dust in a week. I declare it's enough to make a fellow's mouth water just to think about it!"

"Beats working in a musty law office all to bits, eh?" was Carl Felmore's remark, and he uttered a

short laugh. "I'll wager the reports are false, Mark," he added. "Why, if there was so much gold in California the Spaniards out there would have gotten it long before Uncle Sam took possession of the country."

"Here are names and dates," answered Mark, with a serious shake of his head. "If the reports are false, I don't see how they got those."

"Even if the reports are true, I don't think I'd care to go away out to California for the gold," resumed Carl, who was a bit of a coward. "Why, it's three thousand miles from Philadelphia, and you'd have to either go out on horseback most of the way, or take a steamer or a sailboat to the Isthmus of Panama and then up the gold coast, or else go clear around Cape Horn! You don't catch me making such a trip as that!"

"It would just suit me," cried Mark, enthusiastically. "I'd take a trip to the moon if I could get there. I'd like the sport——"

"Never mind taking a trip to the moon, young man!" broke in a harsh voice at Mark's back. "Just get to work and leave California alone. Have you finished that copying I gave you yesterday?"

"Not yet, Mr. Powers," answered Mark. "But I'll have it done in half an hour."

"Good-by, Mark," came from Carl Felmore,

and he slipped out of the office without another word.

"I don't want that Felmore boy hanging around here," cried Jadell Powers, wrathfully. "After this he must keep away."

"He brought over some legal papers for Cross & Barwick," answered Mark, quietly. He saw that his step-father was not in an agreeable frame of mind.

"Oh! Well, he needn't hang around, even so," grumbled Jadell Powers, but in a more subdued tone of voice. "Hurry up with those papers. I must get to court by ten o'clock and it's now half-past nine."

"I'll hurry all I can," answered Mark.

"You were out late last night," went on the lawyer, after a moment of silence.

"Only until ten o'clock. I went to a concert given by the college boys."

"Humph! A fine way to waste your money."

"It was my own money," answered Mark, with spirit.

"Nevertheless, you had no need to throw it away, young man. But don't talk now—get through with those papers," and the lawyer turned away, and departed for a nearby court.

Mark Radley was a lad of sixteen, tall, broad-shouldered, and rather good-looking, with brown

eyes and curly brown hair. He was an orphan, his father having died when he was but five years old and his mother departing this life when the boy was fourteen. Mark had had two sisters, but both had died when quite young.

When Mark was ten years of age, Mrs. Radley had met and married Jadell Powers, a man ten years her senior, and known in Philadelphia as a fairly successful lawyer. Powers was a widower, having one son, who had run away from home when out of grammar school. Those who had dealings with him knew him to be very irritable and a good deal of a miser, but Mrs. Radley knew nothing of his shortcomings until they were married several months. Then her eyes were opened, and for four years—up to the day of her death—she suffered much, but always in silence.

Almost from the start, Mark could not get along with his step-father, and boy and man had more than one open quarrel and on three different occasions the youth was on the point of running away, but the presence of his mother deterred him.

When Mrs. Radley died Mark felt he was free, but much to his consternation he was given to understand that his mother had made no will and that his step-father had legal rights in the property which could not be ignored. By slick

management Jadell Powers had himself made Mark's guardian.

"You must toe the mark after this, young man," said the lawyer, after matters had been adjusted. Then he took Mark out of high school and made the boy enter his law office, although Mark did not take to a legal calling in the slightest degree.

"I wish I had hold of my money, I'd travel a bit before settling down," Mark told his friend Carl. But Mark got hold of very little cash, and so had to stick at the office grind, week in and week out, winter and summer. Once in a great while he slipped away—to play ball or go fishing—but this always brought on a good scolding from his step-father.

"Boys nowadays want to play, they don't want to work," grumbled Jadell Powers. And then he would give Mark copying and other work to do that would keep the lad busy until nine or ten o'clock at night.

Two days before the opening of this story the boy and his step-father had had some hot words concerning several legal documents which Mark had copied. Mr. Powers had given directions to have them transcribed in a certain way. Mark had followed directions, and then the lawyer said that was not the way at all. In his rage Jadell

Powers had threatened to thrash Mark and had taken up a book to throw at the boy's head. But Mark had stood his ground.

"You hit me and I'll hit you!" he cried, pale with resentment, and the look in Mark's eye made the lawyer drop the volume on his desk. There the quarrel rested, but it was not settled by any means.

Mark was so busy copying the papers which had been given to him that he had no time to think of his troubles, but once his step-father was gone a look of disgust crossed the boy's face.

"I'm just about as sick of this as a fellow can be!" he murmured, as he walked across the office, to gaze out of the window to the street below. "It's getting worse and worse every day! I really can't see how I'm going to stand it much longer! I wish I was a thousand miles from here!"

The office was a small affair, fronting on one of the main streets of Philadelphia. Next to it was another apartment, in which were located Mr. Powers' private desk and his safe—the latter an old-fashioned affair and scarcely fireproof.

As Mark gazed out of the window he saw a commotion in the street—coming from a restaurant on the corner. Then the cry of fire was

raised, and soon a crowd gathered, while a dozen people ran from the burning building.

"A fire! I must see it!" cried the lad. He was dying for a little excitement, and rushed out of the office, slamming the door after him. He hurried downstairs and outside, and soon joined the crowd in the street.

In those days—it was but the year 1848—fire engines were not what they are to-day, and it took some time for them to reach the locality of the conflagration. But fortunately, the fire did not amount to much, and in half an hour it was out and the crowd dispersed as rapidly as it had gathered.

"Phew! I'll have to get back to the office—somebody may come in on business!" Mark told himself, and he ran back to the building with all speed. As he hurried up the stairs, he met a man coming down—a tall, slim individual, with a clean-shaven face.

"Excuse me, were you looking for Mr. Powers?" asked the boy. He had never seen the man before.

"No," was the quick answer. "I got into the wrong building. I was looking for No. 324," and without saying more the stranger descended quickly to the lower hall and disappeared into the street.

"He is certainly in a hurry," thought Mark, and soon reached the door to the office—to find it standing wide open. "Humph! I thought I shut this," he added, as he entered.

Everything seemed to be as he had left it, and having taken a look around, he began some more copying, keeping this up until half-past twelve, when his step-father returned and allowed him to go to dinner.

"I want you to copy these papers this afternoon, Mark," said Jadell Powers, when the boy returned. "Mind, I want the work done nicely, and don't leave it until it is all finished."

Mark took the papers and looked them over. There were many pages of fine writing.

"I can't get these done to-day!" he cried.

"Yes, you can!"

"They'll take until to-morrow noon, sir. There are eighteen pages in this, and six pages of that——"

"I want no back talk, young man!" stormed Jadell Powers. "You'll have those done by to-night. If not, I'll have an account to settle with you!" And he shook his fist at the boy.

Mark's temper was none of the best and his face reddened. Then, seized by a mood he could not control, he dashed the legal documents to the floor.

"I won't copy your old papers!" he cried.
"You can copy them yourself!"

"What's that?" screamed Jadell Powers, and of a sudden he made a leap for Mark. But the youth was too quick for him. Catching up his cap, he ran for the door, banging the barrier in his step-father's face. Then he leaped down the stairs, three steps at a time, and reaching the street, hurried up the block and around a corner as fast as his legs could carry him.

CHAPTER II

NEWS FROM CALIFORNIA

"WELL, I wonder what I am to do next?"

It was Mark who asked himself that question. He was sitting in one of the public parks of the city. He had walked rapidly for the best part of an hour and was almost exhausted.

"I'll bet Mr. Powers is as mad as sixteen hornets," he mused. "He will want to skin me alive—if he catches me. But he isn't going to catch me just yet. I'd rather run away than fall into his clutches! How he did glare at me when I threw down those documents! I rather guess I'd best not go back."

Mark sat still for a few minutes and then heaved a deep sigh. Never had he felt so utterly alone as now. He had no relatives to turn to in his troubles.

"What's the matter; out of a job?" asked a man sitting by. He had heard Mark sigh.

"Not exactly," answered the boy, and to avoid

being questioned further, he arose and moved away.

He walked through the park and a little later found himself standing in front of a newspaper office.

"All about the news from Californy!" cried a newsboy with a bundle of papers. "Millions of dollars bein' picked up! People going by the thousands to the gold fields!"

"Give me a paper!" cried Mark, without stopping to think twice. He handed out the price and then began to look at the news from the Far West. It was most alluring, and many stopped on the streets to read all the details.

"Wisht I could go to Californy!" said the newsboy to Mark. "Pickin' up gold is better'n sellin' papers, ain't it?"

"I should say so!" answered Mark, and moved on slowly. "Maybe I'll go!" he continued.

"Wish yer luck," returned the newsboy, gayly, and darted off to dispose of the rest of his papers.

The news was certainly fascinating, and it is small wonder that it caused such wild excitement. Rich and poor alike read the wonderful accounts, and day after day men streamed westward overland, or departed by vessel for Panama, or for the longer trip around Cape Horn.

"What a trip it would be!" murmured Mark,

after the reading of the account was finished. "I declare, I do feel like going. And what's to hinder me?"

He straightened up and a strange look filled his face. Mark was naturally impulsive, but when he made up his mind to do a thing he usually did it.

"Mr. Powers doesn't care for me, and there is nothing to hold me back," he told himself. "Yes, I might as well go! The first people on the ground are sure to get the richest nuggets! Who knows but what I may make my fortune! Ho, for the West!"

A smile of enthusiasm broke out on his face and he quickened his pace. But then he grew thoughtful. He had only seven dollars that he could call his own and six dollars of the amount was at his home, two miles away.

"I'd better get my money and some clothes before Mr. Powers goes home," he reasoned. "If he catches me, there 'll be too much music to suit me!"

In those days there were no trolley cars, only dingy stages running to where Mark wished to go. He hopped aboard one of these, paid his fare, and was soon set down at the right corner.

"Why, you are back early, Master Mark," said the housekeeper, who saw him enter.

"Yes, Mrs. Nason. I'm going on a journey. Mr. Powers hasn't got back yet, has he?"

"No, I don't expect him before his regular time, half-past six."

The housekeeper wanted to question him further, but he ran up to his room. He had a valise which had belonged to his mother, and into this he placed such clothing as he wished to take along. Then he brought out his money, a watch that had been his father's, and some jewelry that had belonged to Mrs. Radley.

"I may have to sell some of those things before I reach the Land of Gold," he thought. "But I'll not dispose of them until I actually have to."

When he went below, he found the housekeeper waiting for him.

"So you are going on a journey," she said. "May I ask where to, Master Mark?"

"I'm sorry, but I cannot tell you," he answered, briefly. "To tell the truth, Mrs. Nason, I don't want my step-father to know."

"Oh!" The housekeeper grew doubly interested. "Do you mean to say you are going to run away?"

"I don't think I'll run very much."

"You must have had another quarrel."

"We are quarreling all the time. I can't stand his ways, Mrs. Nason."

"I don't blame you, Master Mark. He is a terrible hard man to get along with. Maybe he means well, but, but——"

"If he does, he doesn't show it. I must be off, for I don't want to meet him. Good-by." He held out his hand.

"Good-by, and good-luck, no matter where you go! But you must come back some day! The property is yours, remember that!"

"Oh, I'll remember, and I'll come back," answered Mark, and gave her a smile.

"And one thing more, Master Mark," the housekeeper continued, in a lower tone. "If you need money, I have some saved, and——"

"Thank you, Mrs. Nason, you are very kind. But I don't want any but my own."

"If you do, write, and I'll send you some," she continued.

"Thank you very much."

"And if you get into trouble, let me know, and I'll do what I can for you."

"Perhaps I'll send you a letter some day. But you mustn't show it to Mr. Powers."

"I'll do as you wish, Master Mark."

Mark put on his cap and turned towards the front door. Soon he was outside and hurrying towards the front gate. As he opened it he found himself face to face with his step-father.

"Ha! I thought you might be here!" roared Jadell Powers. "I've caught you nicely!" He grabbed the youth by the arm. "What are you doing with that bag?"

"It's my bag, and I am going away!" retorted Mark. "Let go of me!"

"Let go? Not much, young man! I have caught you red-handed!"

"I don't know what you mean by red-handed," said Mark, doggedly. "I am going away and that is all there is to it. You shan't stop me!"

"If you talk like that, do you know what I'll do?" stormed Jadell Powers. "I'll hand you over to the police!"

"You have no right to do that."

"Yes, I have!"

"You have not. I have done no wrong. You want to make a regular slave of me, but I won't stand it. I'm going to strike out for myself."

"Tut! tut, a fine way for a boy of your age to speak! You ought to be in a—a reformatory this minute! This is what I get for trying to make a man of you!"

"I don't want to be a lawyer, and I'm not going to copy legal documents all day long," answered Mark, as determinedly as ever.

"You'll be what I want you to be!"

"It takes two to make a bargain, Mr. Powers.

Ever since my mother died you have tried to rule over me with a rod of iron. But I won't stand it. I'm going away and I'll take care of myself, until I am of age. Then I'll come back and claim what belongs to me."

"Humph!" The lawyer paused for a second. "Where do you calculate to go?" he questioned, curiously.

"That is my business."

"Maybe you want to take that trip to the moon, or to California, eh?"

"I've heard there are good chances for a boy in New York and Boston," said Mark, to throw his step-father off the scent.

"Tut! tut! There are just as good chances right here in Philadelphia. Remember the old saying, 'A rolling stone gathers no moss.' "

"I don't want to gather moss; I want to do as the rolling stone does, get polished," answered Mark, grimly.

"If you stay in Philadelphia and behave yourself, I'll try my best to make a man of you."

"Mr. Powers, we can't get along together—you know that as well as I do. Ever since mother died we have quarreled. I can't stand it any longer,—and so I am going away."

"Humph!"

"You can sneer if you wish—but I am going away,—and I'll do the best I can for myself."

"Going away to have a good time, I suppose. As soon as your money is gone you'll be back on my hands."

"No, I won't be back."

"Well, you shan't go away with my money," and now the lawyer tightened his grip on his stepson's arm.

"Your money?" came from Mark. "What little I have is my own."

"Really?" And Jadell Powers' face took on a sour look.

"Yes, really. I've only got seven dollars, but every penny of that I saved myself—out of the little spending money you allow me, and out of what I got when I sold that old sled and pair of skates I had."

"Mark, you're a cute rascal, but your story won't hold water. You've got three hundred dollars that belongs to me!"

"Three hundred dollars?" gasped the youth, in amazement.

"Yes, three hundred dollars—which you took from my safe this very morning!" cried Jadell Powers. "I want you to hand the money over instantly. If you don't, I'll call an officer of the law and have you locked up!"

CHAPTER III

MARK RUNS AWAY

FOR the moment after his step-father had announced that he had lost three hundred dollars Mark was so dumfounded that he could not speak.

"I—you—Did you lose three hundred dollars?" he gasped, at last.

"Yes, I did. And you've got the money," returned Jadell Powers.

"Mr. Powers, I haven't a cent of that money. In fact, I didn't know you had three hundred dollars in the safe."

"I know better. I put the money in there yesterday, and you were there when I did it."

"Perhaps I was there, but I didn't see you handle any money. Are you sure it was stolen?"

"Of course I am."

"Didn't you lock the safe door?"

"Yes, but the safe is old and anybody could get it open by trying. Come, Mark, confess and give back the money. If you don't, you know what I said."

The youth did not listen to the words. He was thinking of the stranger he had met on the stairs, when returning from the fire. Could that individual be the thief?

"Mark, do you hear me?" stormed Jadell Powers. "Tell me where that money is this instant!"

"I don't know where it is. But I think I know who took it."

"Was there anybody else in the office?"

"I think so, although I am not sure. Did you hear about the fire in Koster's bakery?"

"Yes."

"Well, when the fire broke out I ran downstairs to see what was the matter. I stayed down in the street a while. When I started to come back to the office I met a strange man coming down the stairs. I asked him if he wanted to see you. He said no, and said he had gotten into the wrong building. He got out into the street in a terrible hurry."

"Tut, tut, young man! Do you expect me to believe such a cock-and-bull story as that? Not I! Just you hand over that money, or I'll call a policeman without delay."

Mark gazed at his step-father in horror. Evidently the close-fisted lawyer meant just what he said, and the youth had a dim mental vision of

being dragged to prison and of being convicted of an awful crime.

"I haven't got the money, and I don't intend to be locked up!" he burst out, and with a dexterous twist he freed himself from his step-father's grasp and bounded down the street.

"Stop! Stop!" yelled Jadell Powers. "Stop, I say! Somebody stop him! He's a thief!"

He ran after the boy, but Mark was a swift runner and soon put a goodly distance between himself and his pursuer. Fortunately, no other people were close at hand, and by the time some men and boys joined in the chase, Mark was three squares away and still running like a frightened deer.

"He shan't catch me!" he muttered to himself, as he kept up his running.

He was somewhat hampered by his valise, which was heavy, and on reaching a street where ran a line of stages, he jumped aboard a passing vehicle. As the driver was behind time, he whipped up his horses, and before long Mark was a good mile from home. Nobody seemed to be in pursuit and this caused him to breathe a sigh of relief.

Yet the youth felt strangely depressed. Contrary to his expectations, he was leaving home under a heavy cloud.

"Unless the real thief is caught, Mr. Powers will always think I took that money," he reasoned, dismally. "Perhaps I am to blame, too, for I left the office during business hours and forgot to lock the door."

At last Mark found himself in the shipping district of the city. It was growing dark, and the majority of the business people had taken themselves to their homes. As the stage came to a corner, he alighted and stared around him, not knowing where to go next.

"I guess I had better get out of town," he told himself. "Mr. Powers will be after me hot-footed to-night and in the morning. Three hundred dollars looks like a fortune to him. And it is a big sum of money. Wish I had it for my own! I'd start West right away, and ride all the way, too!"

An hour later found Mark on the way out of town. Strange as it may seem, he fell in with a man who was driving ten horses which had just come in on a boat. The man wanted to know the way to the village of Chesbrook.

"I know the way," said the boy, quickly. "Let me ride one of the horses and I'll show you."

"If you want to go to Chesbrook, hop up," answered the man, and in a moment Mark was in the saddle for the twenty-mile journey.

"I haven't got much money and I want to save all I can," explained Mark.

"Horseback traveling is good enough for me," answered the man. "I hate a stage coach, an' them railroad trains is too plaguety risky. I rode in one once an' I felt sure we was goin' to be killed ev'ry minit!"

"Then you don't belong in the East?"

"No, I belong out to Hankertown, in the western part o' the State."

"Are you going that far?"

"Yes, after a day's stop at Chesbrook."

"Going to take the horses along?"

"Four of 'em. The others are for a man at Chesbrook."

"Then maybe you won't mind if I ride to Hankertown with you," went on Mark, after pausing in thought.

"Oh, are you goin' West?"

"Yes—if I can get there."

"Say, you ain't goin' to try for Californy?" cried the man, with added interest.

"Perhaps—I haven't made up my mind exactly. Maybe I'll get tired of the trip after I've been on the road a while."

"I'd like to take the trip to Californy myself. But I don't know as I can git away. I've been away from hum a good spell already."

It was well on towards midnight when Chesbrook was reached. It was only a small village, with a small square building that went by the name of hotel. Here the man put up for the night, and Mark did the same, the boy paying "four shillings"—fifty cents—for his bed and breakfast in the morning.

By ten o'clock the man with the horses had transacted his business at the village and he and Mark began their journey further westward. It was a clear day and a night's rest had put the boy in fine condition physically, although he was still worried, fearing that his step-father might be on his track.

Towards the middle of the afternoon Mark and Jed Dickson—such was the man's name—came to a fork in the road.

"Which is the right road?" questioned the boy, as he drew rein.

"I allow as how the road to the right is right," answered Jed Dickson.

They turned in that direction, but scarcely had they covered half a mile when they saw that the road was very poor and that there had been no traveling upon it for several days.

"This looks like a side road to me," observed Mark.

"Reckon you're correct," answered the man.

He scratched his head. "Ain't nothin' to do but to go back."

"Wait, I hear talking!" went on Mark. "Somebody must be coming. Perhaps we can find out which way to go."

They waited and heard two persons coming along, each on horseback. One was a burly fellow of fifty, with a heavy beard, and the other a youth of Mark's age, dressed in a sailor suit.

"Say, messmate, it looks to me like we were on the wrong tack," came from the sailor boy, as he drew rein just around a bend from where Mark and Jed Dickson were waiting.

"Oh, we're all right," came from the burly man. "By the way, how much money did you say you had with you?" he continued.

"One hundred and forty dollars—and I don't want to lose it, either."

"Let me carry it for you, lad."

"No, I'll carry it myself. And I reckon I'll go back," went on the sailor boy.

"You'll hand that money over to me," cried the burly man.

"What, would you rob me?" gasped the youth.

"I want that money, and I am bound to have it," came coolly from the burly individual. "We are alone out here, so it won't help you to make a fuss about it."

"You brought me here to rob me!" cried the sailor boy. "I thought something was wrong. Well, you ain't going to rob me just yet. Get up there!" The last words to his horse.

"Stop!" roared the burly man, and urging his own steed forward he caught the other horse. "That money, I say, or I'll——"

"Hi! leave him alone!" cried Mark, riding forward. "Leave him alone, you villain!"

"We don't allow no highway robbery in these parts," sang out Jed Dickson.

Both came up alongside of the burly fellow, who drew back in commingled alarm and disgust.

"Hullo—friends!" sang out the sailor boy, joyfully. "Here's luck for me sure!"

"And no luck for me!" growled the burly man, and urging his steed around, he disappeared back of some bushes and was gone.

"Do you know that man?" asked Mark.

"Never clapped eyes on him until this morning," answered the other boy. "He said he would show me the way to Hopeville, but I guess he wanted to get me in some lonely spot and then rob me. You two came up in the nick of time,—and I'm mighty glad of it!" He gave Mark and Jed Dickson a grateful look.

"Where did you come from?" asked Dickson.

"From Philadelphia. You see, I'm just ashore

from a whaling voyage," was the answer. "I got tired of the sea and thought I'd try it on land for a spell. I've got an old aunt living at Hopeville and I allowed I'd pay her a visit. My name is Bob Billings. Who are you?"

"I am Mark Radley."

"And I am Jed Dickson. Don't you want to go after that rascal?"

"I don't reckon we can catch him, for he'll do his best to keep out of sight," answered Bob Billings. "I was a fool to let him know what money I was carrying with me. I got paid off four days ago, and I thought if my aunt needed anything I'd let her have some of the cash. She's the only relative I've got in the world."

CHAPTER IV

MARK MAKES A FRIEND

MARK soon discovered that Bob Billings was a light-hearted chap who took matters as they came, without making much fuss about things.

"I should have been mad if that man had robbed me," said the sailor boy. "But as he didn't get my money I'm going to drop the matter. But if I ever meet him again I'll give him a black eye, or else my name isn't Bob!"

"Hopeville is on the road we want to take," said Jed Dickson. "An' such bein' the case, we may as well travel together for a spell;" and so it was agreed.

As they journeyed along Bob Billings told much about himself. His parents had died while he was young, and he had been turned over to the care of an old sea captain who had taken him on several trips to Cuba and Porto Rico. Then the captain had died and Bob had shipped for the whaling voyage just mentioned. But whaling had not suited him and he said he was now going

to stay ashore for some time and perhaps for good.

"Sailing isn't what it is cracked up to be," said he. "The grub is poor and the hands are sometimes treated like dogs. I'll have to get the fever pretty bad before I go to sea again."

"I never had any desire to go to sea," said Mark. "I'd rather make my fortune on land."

"Where are you bound?"

"I've got a notion to strike out for California. But it's a long journey."

"You're right there. Heard about the gold, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"I heard about that myself. I met one man in Philadelphia who was crazy on the subject. He sold almost the shirt off his back to get money enough to buy a ticket on a steamer for Panama."

"I'd rather go overland—I think it would be more fun."

"You'll have the Rocky Mountains to climb," put in Jed Dickson. "Won't be no fun in that—especially if you're out there in the winter time!"

"Oh, I don't mind the cold so much."

"I've been thinking of going to California myself," resumed Bob Billings. "But I want to see how old Aunt Betsey is first. Maybe she will want me to stay with her for a spell. She didn't

use to care for me, but maybe she is changed now."

Hopeville was reached about supper time, and Mark and Jed Dickson put up at the local tavern, while Bob Billings went off to find his aunt, whom he had not seen in three years.

"He's a nice sort," said Mark. "If I went to California I'd like to have him along."

An hour passed and they were just finishing their supper when the sailor boy reappeared. His face wore a sober look.

"I've had bad news," said he, dropping into a chair. "My aunt died nearly a year ago. They sent me a letter about it, but it never reached me."

"That's hard luck," said Mark, sympathetically.

"Did she leave any money?" questioned the matter-of-fact Dickson.

"Left about a hundred dollars, so they tell me, and that was used to pay her funeral expenses. They sold off her things, and a lawyer is keeping about another hundred in trust for me. But I'd rather Aunt Betsey was alive. Now I'm utterly alone in the world."

Bob Billings put up at the hotel, going into a room with Mark. Before retiring the two became quite confidential.

"So you're running away," said Bob, on hearing Mark's story. "Well, I don't blame you, if

your step-father is that sort. I'd cut sticks myself. I hope you make your pile, if you ever reach California."

"Don't you want to go, now you are all alone?"

"Yes, I do, and there's my hand on it!"

The boys shook hands warmly—and from that moment they were chums. They talked over many things, and Mark confessed that he had but five dollars and a quarter left of the amount with which he had started.

"Never mind, I've got quite a pile," answered Bob.

"But I don't want to sponge on you, Bob."

"I'll make you a loan of twenty-five dollars," replied the sailor boy, producing the money. "I haven't forgotten how you saved me from being robbed. If it hadn't been for you and Dickson I'd be penniless."

"Well, I'll take the money as a loan—when what I have on hand is gone," answered Mark.

It was decided that Mark should remain at Hopeville with Bob for a few days, and in the morning the two boys bid good-by to Jed Dickson. As a keepsake, and for his kindness in assisting Bob, the sailor boy presented Dickson with a fancy watch charm, for which the man was very thankful.

"Hope we meet again some day," said Dickson

to both boys. "Maybe in the gold diggings, eh?"

"Perhaps," answered Mark. As yet, California seemed a long way off.

During the day Bob saw the lawyer who had the money left by the sailor boy's aunt. There was a little trouble about getting the lawyer to turn the money over to Bob—he not being of age—but finally the matter was straightened out and Bob found himself exactly ninety-five dollars richer than before.

"Now, take my advice and be careful of your cash," said the lawyer.

"I'm going to California," answered Bob. "And I'm going to take my friend here with me."

"Indeed! It's a long trip for boys!"

"I guess we'll get through somehow," said Bob, lightly.

When the two boys were by themselves, Bob insisted that Mark should carry exactly half the money.

"If we are going to be partners, you've got to shoulder half the responsibility," said the sailor boy.

"Partners it is!" cried Mark. "Say, Bob, you're the right sort, and I like you tremendously!"

"And I like you. Shake! We're partners

from this minute forward. If we reach California and get any gold——”

“It’s share and share alike,” finished Mark. “I hope we get a ton or two of nuggets!”

“A ton! You don’t want much! Why didn’t you say ten tons while you were about it? Now I’d like to find a nugget about as big as——”

“Your head,” finished Mark.

“Well, that would be plenty large enough, I’m certain.”

On the next day the journey westward was resumed. They went partly by stage and then struck a coal road and got a “lift” on one of the cars. After that came a journey on one of the streams flowing into the Ohio. Then they got aboard a flatboat bound for the Mississippi.

“This is something like,” said Bob, as they watched the boat glide along. The flatboat was of fair size and carried twenty or thirty passengers. The deckhands were negroes and they sang as they worked. The furnace on the craft burnt wood, and they often had to make a landing at a yard along the river bank, to get fresh fuel aboard.

They were making one of these landings when the two boys saw a lively discussion going on between two men. One was trying to sell a good-

sized scow to the other for ten dollars. The other man, however, wanted to give only five dollars.

"Say, we might take that scow!" cried Mark. "We could easily float down to the Mississippi in it and then sell it at Cairo, or some other point. We could take provisions along, and such traveling would be very cheap."

"Let's do it!" cried Bob. The idea of navigating a craft of their own appealed to him, in spite of the fact that he wanted no more of life on the ocean.

They went ashore, and after a few minutes' talk bought the scow for eight dollars. Then, from a nearby farmer, they procured some provisions, and by nightfall were on their way westward once more.

"Let's call the scow *Eldorado*," cried Mark. "And you are now Captain Bob."

"What does *Eldorado* mean?" questioned Bob. "I hear them talking of California as an *Eldorado*."

"It means Golden—the Land of Gold," answered Mark.

"Well, this scow isn't golden—it's mud-color, Mark."

"Oh, I was only getting poetic, Bob."

"All right then, *Eldorado* it is, and if I'm to be

captain you'll have to be first mate and the whole crew," came from Bob, merrily.

The scow was provided with a mast and a sail, and, the wind being favorable, they put up the sheet, Bob showing Mark how to fasten it in true nautical style. There was a long sweep at the stern for a rudder, and the sailor boy sat by it, to keep the scow to her course down the river.

"We'll have to go ashore when we want to cook food," said Mark. "We won't dare to make a fire on board."

"Well, what's the odds? Our time is our own."

"That's true, too."

"I shouldn't mind making the whole trip in this scow."

Two days went by and they made rapid progress down the Ohio. They had some trouble at the rapids, but nothing serious. Then came a day of mist and rain.

"This isn't so pleasant," observed the sailor boy. "We ought to hang out a danger signal, or we may run into something."

It soon began to thunder and lighten, and fearing the craft might be struck, they ran up to the river bank and tied fast. Scarcely had this been accomplished than the water came down in a perfect flood.

They had already covered their provisions with the sail, and now they did what they could to keep the goods from getting soaked. The rain continued to come down, and to protect themselves they hurried away to where a clump of trees afforded something of a shelter. Here they remained the best part of an hour, when the wind shifted and the storm cleared away rapidly, along with the mist.

“Let us get back to the boat,” said Mark, and started out, followed by Bob. The river bank was soon reached and they gazed around them in consternation. The scow was gone!

CHAPTER V

UP A TREE

"SOMEBODY has taken our boat, Bob!"

"It looks like it, Mark, but I didn't see anybody," answered the sailor boy, gazing up and down the river in perplexity.

"The mist must have hidden the person from view," went on Mark.

"Did you tie the craft fast?"

"No, I left that to you!"

"And I left it to you!"

"Well, I never! In that case neither of us tied her up."

"And she has simply floated away!" came with a groan. "Say, I ought to be kicked well for this!"

"Let us hurry along the bank—perhaps we can catch up with the scow."

Without more ado the two lads walked along the bank, over the grass and rocks and then around a patch of tall brushwood. In the un-

certain light Bob went down into a hole up to his knees.

"Take care!" he called out, warningly. "If you don't, you'll break a leg, or your head!"

"This is one of the delights of floating down the river," replied Mark, making a wry face. "Oh, it's chuck-full of fun!"

"We've got to find the scow, Mark. If we don't, we'll have to go supperless, and perhaps tramp for miles to the next settlement."

"I'm just as willing to find the scow as you are, Bob. Come."

Again they went on, but with increased caution, for neither wished to fall into any hole. Soon they came to a portion of the river where heavy trees overhung the bank.

"I see something around the bend!" cried Mark. "Unless I am mistaken, it's the scow!"

"You are right, Mark. But we'll have to walk around a long distance to get to her. Here is a cove ahead."

They left the river bank, intending to skirt the cove Bob had mentioned. The brushwood was thick, and further on they had to pass several low-hanging trees.

"Hark!" called Mark, suddenly. "Am I mistaken, or did I hear a dog barking?"

They listened, and made out the deep baying

of a hound. Then came more baying from another hound.

"Hounds, and they are after us!" said Bob. "I don't like this. They may not be friendly."

"Here they come!" answered Mark, catching sight of the animals between the trees. "Gracious! I believe they are bloodhounds!"

"Up into a tree with you, quick!" said Bob, and ran to the nearest limb. He swung himself up with ease and then pulled Mark after him.

They had scarcely reached the top of the limb when two bloodhounds came running up, followed by a third and then a fourth. They were ugly-looking animals, and standing at the foot of the tree they glared up savagely at the boys.

"Ugh! They mean business," said Mark. "Get away from here!" And he shook his hand at the dogs, which made them bay loudly and show their teeth.

"Come on up to the next limb," said Bob, nervously. "I don't want any of those critters to sample me." And he climbed up and Mark did the same.

"Bob, we're treed."

"That's so. But the presence of the dogs must mean that a house is near."

"I wish the owner of the dogs would come along and call them off."

"Let us yell for help."

Both raised their voices and called several times. Then the bloodhounds bayed for half a minute, but no answer came back.

"If the owner is around he isn't paying much attention," said Mark, ruefully. "I'd like to know what the dogs will do next."

"As they can't climb the tree they'll most likely stay below."

"Yes, but for how long?"

"That's a riddle I can't answer. Maybe they'll keep us here all night."

"If I had a pistol I'd shoot the brutes!"

"That might get us into more trouble. For all we know, we may be on private property. Most likely we are—if there is a house near."

"Wish I was on that flatboat just about now."

"Or the scow."

The boys relapsed into silence, and seeing this, the bloodhounds took positions under the tree and proceeded to make themselves comfortable.

"The imps are going to stay," said Mark, with a deep sigh. "Bob, we are booked for the night."

"Yes, and in the meantime the scow may float further. I don't think she is caught very tightly. A change in the wind, or in the flow of water, may loosen her once more."

“Do you think we can fool the dogs by climbing into the next tree?”

“We can try it, but I don’t think it will work.”

Without caution they went up to another limb and from this swung themselves gently into the next tree. They had hardly done so when the bloodhounds began to shift also.

“It’s no use, they’ll follow us up every time,” said Mark.

An hour went by and still the hounds kept their position under the trees. Once in a while one would place his forepaws on the tree and look up savagely and wistfully.

“I really believe they’d like to make a meal of us,” said Bob, with a shiver. “Say, this is getting to California with a vengeance!”

“Never despair!” answered Mark, hopefully. “I must say I’m growing sleepy.”

“I’m sleepy myself, but I’m not going to sleep and fall off the tree just yet.”

Two hours more went by and all was now pitch-dark around them. Finding a rotten limb the boys broke it into pieces and hurled the sticks at the bloodhounds, which brought forth more bay-ing and more snapping of teeth.

“They don’t mind the sticks any more than straws,” declared Bob. “They are too tough to be hurt that way.”

"Hark!" said his companion. "I thought I heard somebody calling."

"There goes one of the dogs," said Bob, who chanced to be looking downward. "I guess somebody must have called him!"

"Let us shout again."

They did so, and kept up the calls for fully five minutes. Then from a distance an answer came back.

"Who's dat a-calling?" came in a rich negro voice.

"We are," answered Mark. "Two boys."

"Whar is you-uns?"

"Up a tree near the river. Our boat drifted away and your dogs treed us."

"Am dat so? Did you say two boys?"

"Yes."

"Is you-uns armed?"

"If we were you'd have some dead dogs around here," put in Bob.

"What fo' you-uns come ashoah?" asked the voice, and now a burly negro put in an appearance under the tree. He had a smoky barn lantern in one hand and a stout club in the other.

"We didn't come ashore here," answered Mark. "We landed some distance above here, during the storm. Then our boat drifted down the stream

and we followed along the river bank, until your dogs came for us."

"Did dem dorgs bite you-uns?"

"We didn't give them the chance," said Bob.

"Whar you-uns gwine?"

"To Cairo, if we can make it."

A little additional talk followed, and at last the negro was convinced that they meant no harm. Then he called off the bloodhounds and chained them up.

"To tell de truf, I didn't know da was loose," said he. "Colonel Racket mustah hab fogotten bound dem."

"Who is Colonel Racket?" questioned Mark.

"De colonel is ma mastah, sah—he owns dis place, sah."

"Is he around?"

"No, sah; he off to de horse races an' won't be back until day aftah to-morrow. He put me in charge. Whar's dat boat you-uns dun spoke 'bout?"

"Out on the river somewhere—she was over yonder a couple of hours ago," answered Bob.

The negro went with them down to the shore and swung the smoky lantern above his head.

"Dar's a scow out dar," he cried, presently.

"That's our boat," cried Mark. "How can we get to her? Have you a rowboat?"

"Suah. Wait, I'll git her," said the negro, and ran off. Soon they saw him returning with a skiff. They entered the craft and in a few minutes were aboard of the scow once more. To their delight they saw that the flat-bottom craft was uninjured and that their store of provisions was safe.

"We might have been miles down the river, if it hadn't been for your hounds," grumbled Bob.

"And had supper too," put in Mark.

"Ain't you-uns had nuffin to eat?"

"No."

"Den come up to de house, an' I'll git Aunt Katie to cook sumfin fo' you-uns. De colonel always treats strangers well."

Having been out in the wet so long, the boys did not object to going where they could dry themselves, and making the scow fast, they followed the negro to the house, which stood on a rise of ground some distance away. The negro cook, Aunt Katie, had gone to bed, but she was aroused, and inside of half an hour had a hot supper ready, which the lads ate with great satisfaction. In the meantime they dried their clothes, so that they felt comfortable once more.

"You-uns kin stay heah all night, if you-uns wants to," said the negro, after consulting the cook.

"Thanks, we will," said Mark, and both were shown to a nicely furnished bedchamber. Here they slept soundly until morning, and then, after breakfast, proceeded on their journey once more.

CHAPTER VI

TWO BOYS AND A MULE

"THE Mississippi at last, Mark!"

It was Bob who uttered the cry, late one afternoon, some time after the events recorded in the last chapter. He was standing in the front of the scow, shading his eyes with his hand.

"It's a pretty big stream of water," answered Mark, gazing forward curiously. He drew a long breath. "Bob, about one-third of our journey to California is finished!"

"Right you are, Mark. But I'm afraid we have the toughest part of the trip still before us."

"Do you regret starting?"

"Not in the least, and you couldn't hire me to turn back," was the quick response.

"Are you going to stop at Cairo?"

"Don't you think we had better cross the river instead?"

"No, for we can't sail the scow against such a strong current. We had better stick to our original intention and sell the craft, and then take

a steamboat from Cairo to some place up the Missouri."

During the past few days the boys had learned that Independence, Missouri, located not many miles from Kansas City, was one of the places at which thousands of emigrants for the West were gathering, with their wagons and their horses and cattle. It was still early in the year and the pioneers were waiting for the grass to grow, so that they might have fodder for their animals during the long and tedious journey overland.

"They say it will take at least three months to get across the Rocky Mountains and into California," said Mark.

"Yes, and it may take longer—so I heard one man say," returned Bob. "He said nobody would dare to try getting over the mountains after the snow began to fall. If we can't get over by the first of November, we'll have to stay on this side until next spring."

"We'll have to get a regular outfit,—or else join some company going over."

"I'd rather have my own outfit."

"Oh, so would I."

That night they landed near Cairo—which was only a small place in those days. They offered the scow to a number of boatmen and finally disposed of the craft in a most unusual manner.

"See heah," said a man from Alabama, who sat on a mule, chewing a quid of tobacco. "If you're out fer a trade—I'm with yer. I allowed I was gwine to Californy on th' back o' this mule. But I've changed my mind an' I'm gwine home. If ye want to swap the scow fer the mule speak up; an' if ye don't, hold yer peace. Washington Gossnacker has spoken."

"Let's take him up," whispered Mark. "The mule may come in handy."

"What will you give to boot?" asked Bob, cautiously.

"Th' harness an' the saddle an' not a cent's wuth moah, sonny. Is it a go?"

"Yes," answered Bob.

"Co-rect, neighbor—the mule is yours. Don't never git behind him, onless ye want to go to heav'n by th' direct route," added the man from Alabama.

"Which means that he can kick," said Mark, in dismay.

"Wall, I reckon he wouldn't be a mule ef he couldn't do thet same," responded Washington Gossnacker.

The transfer was made on the spot, and while the man from Alabama took possession of the scow, Bob swung himself up on the mule's back. As quick as a flash the animal swerved around,

began to kick, and then set off at a break-neck speed up the street.

"Whoa!" yelled Bob, holding tight to the reins. "Whoa, you skyrocket; whoa, I say!"

"Look out that he don't throw you!" screamed Mark, and he started after his chum, and several in the crowd followed. Up the street went the mule, with Bob clinging desperately to the saddle. Then the boy gave the reins a strong pull and spoke gently to the animal, and soon the mule came to a stop.

"Better get down," suggested Mark, as he came up.

"No, sir, I'm going to show Mr. Mule that I am his new master," returned Bob, and he made the mule run once more, stopping and starting him half a dozen times. At last the mule was worn out and under perfect control, and then Bob patted him gently and gave him something to eat.

"Do you think it was a bad trade?" asked Mark. He could not help grinning, now the danger was past.

"No, I don't—for the old scow was beginning to leak!" answered Bob, and then both boys laughed outright.

"Now we've got a mule, what we shall need next is a wagon," went on Mark, a moment later.

"Then some provisions, and ho! for the wild West and gold!"

Finding a suitable hotel, they remained there over night and had the mule cared for. Mark named the animal Darling, and Darling he remained for the rest of the wonderful trip. Taken all in all he was not a bad mule, although inclined at times to be tricky.

By consulting the hotel clerk they learned that they could obtain passage on a steamboat bound up the Missouri River, and also transportation for the mule, and left Cairo that noon, on the *Pride of the River*, a steamboat that had seen better days.

"What a crowd of passengers!" remarked Bob. "Wonder if they are all bound for the gold fields?"

"Likely not," replied Mark. "Some are settlers and planters, and others are just plain business men."

"And some are gamblers," added the sailor boy. And he was right, for gambling flourished vigorously in those days on all the boats of the Mississippi and the Missouri. The game went on day and night, and many a fortune was lost. The great majority of the gamblers were tricksters, and sometimes, when one was caught at his tricks, he was shot or run off the boat.

"What a life to lead!" said Bob. "I can tell you, no gambling for me!"

"Nor for me," answered Mark. "The fellow who gambles deserves to lose; and I guess he generally does, too, unless he's a sharp."

With it all, the boys found the journey up the Mississippi and up the Missouri very interesting. They sat near the bow of the boat,—out of the way of the thick black smoke from the stack—and watched the scenery along the shores. In those days the settlements were nearly all small, and much of the great forests which have since been cut down was standing.

A stop of half an hour was made at St. Louis and the boys had a glimpse of that old French town.

"Some day I fancy this will be a big city," observed Mark.

"Oh, the whole West and Middle West will fill up some day," said Bob. "Uncle Sam's children must go somewhere, and the population is increasing wonderfully."

As soon as the *Pride of the River* turned into the Missouri they observed the change in the water. Where it had been fairly clear before it was now dark and muddy.

"The mud comes from the banks," said Mark. "They tell me they are washing away continually,



“THE MISSISSIPPI AT LAST!” UTTERED BOB.—P. 45.

Pioneer Boys of the Gold Fields

so that a fellow may have a big farm on the riverside one day and have about nothing the next!"

The boys had decided to leave the steamboat at a small place known as Brosberry's Landing—somebody having told them that it was a great starting place for gold seekers, being but a few miles from Independence. As soon as the boat tied up they went ashore, Bob leading the mule and Mark carrying his valise and his chum's bundle. A dozen men, of various ages, went with them.

"Here's a new lot of gold hunters!" came the cry, from the dock.

"Two boys an' a mule!" sang out a man who had spotted our young friends. "Goin' to Californy?"

"You bet!" responded Bob, using a common expression of those days.

"Hands up on me!" answered the man, with a grin. "Hope ye win out!"

The boys soon discovered that Brosberry's Landing consisted of nothing more than a general store, two gambling halls, and a motley collection of shanties and tents, the latter used by men bound for the West.

"I must say, I don't like it much here," was Mark's comment, after a walk around. "Let us

move towards Independence. Old man Spat said he was going over."

"Then let us follow Spat."

They had struck up an acquaintance with Ira Spat on the steamboat. He was from Maine, tall, thin, and leathery, having spent much of his time as a lumberman on the Penobscot. He was rough but good-hearted, and the boys liked him.

"This air spot don't suit me wuth shucks," said Ira Spat. "I'm a-goin' to find somethin' better," and he started for Independence on foot, with a stick and a big carpetbag over his shoulder. The boys followed, taking turns at riding Darling, who seemed to enjoy being on *terra firma* once more.

It was not long before they came upon a flat stretch of prairie land, with an occasional patch of timber and a small stream. Here and there folks were camping out, and as they advanced the encampments became thicker, until the scene was a decidedly animated one.

"There must be thousands of folks here!" exclaimed Mark. "And all bound for California, too! Bob, we shan't lack for company!"

Some of the gold hunters had little or nothing, while others had nearly the whole of their household goods. Wagons and carts were numerous and so were horses, mules, and cows. Many of

the emigrants—for they were nothing else—had their families with them, resolute-looking wives and children of all sizes and dispositions. One man had three old-maid daughters with him, while in another gathering there was a baby but four months old.

“That youngster is going to hunt gold early,” said Bob, after meeting the woman with the baby. The infant was the talk of the camp, and every woman there wanted to hold it and pet it.

After a long look around, Mark and Bob decided to pitch their camp near a brook and a short distance away from the others in that vicinity. At the general store they had purchased a small but good tent and this they erected, and then cut a ditch around it, that the rain might run off.

“Now we can stay here until we are ready to begin the long trip overland,” said Bob; and so it was settled.

CHAPTER VII

TAKING IN ANOTHER PARTNER

THEY soon became acquainted with several folks camping in that vicinity. Next to them on one side was a man from Iowa named Josiah Socket, who had with him his wife and five children, three boys and two girls. Socket was a quiet individual, but his wife could talk enough for a dozen people.

"How do you do?" said the woman, the morning after Bob and Mark had settled down. "Nice morning, isn't it, but the sun is going to be warm. All alone, and only boys, too! Do you expect to get all the way to California? But of course you do, or you wouldn't be here. It's going to be a long trip, so I'm telling Josiah—I mean my husband. Doing your own cooking, too, I see. You ought to have some woman to do that. Where are you from, if I'm not asking what I hadn't ought to?"

"We're from Pennsylvania," answered Mark.

"Land sakes alive! You've had a pretty big

trip already, haven't you? Did you come on that mule? I like mules almost as well as horses. At home my father had six mules, and they worked——"

"Ann, don't talk those boys to death," interrupted Mr. Socket.

"Who's talking anybody to death? I'm certain I'm not, Josiah Socket—I scarcely said a word. I've got a right to find out who my neighbors are, haven't I? If I depended on you, we'd never know a soul in this whole community. Now I believe in being sociable, and——"

"Excuse me, madam, but we must be off," said Mark. "We've got to buy some things, and——"

"Run along, lads," said Josiah Socket. "Ann will keep you here all day if you let her." And they hurried away while Socket had to stand a good lecture from his spouse.

The boys had decided to go to town and see how cheaply they could obtain a small wagon and some provisions. They had heard that it would be necessary to take along beans, flour, coffee, and numerous other articles. They also wanted to get a rifle and a shotgun, and it was a serious question as to how much the articles were to cost.

"We can't spend all of our money," said Bob. "For there is no telling what we may need when we get to the gold diggings."

As they walked along—they had left the mule in care of one of the Socket boys—they came to a small hillock of ground, upon which a boy of their own age was sitting. He was rather shabbily dressed, and his straw hat had a large hole through the crown.

"Can you tell us the way to Ulmer's store?" asked Bob, more to speak to the lad than for any other purpose, since he knew the direction fairly well.

"Sure I can," was the ready answer, and the boy pointed with his sunburnt hand. "Take that trail yonder, and then the first trail on the left. You can't miss it. He has a flag flying all the time, and a crowd of emigrants are always hanging around."

"Thank you."

"Are you fellows bound for California?"

"We are," put in Mark. The strange boy interested him.

"Wish I was going. Of course your folks are with you."

"I haven't any folks," returned Bob. "I'm alone in the world, excepting for my chum Mark," and he nodded to his companion.

"We are going alone," said Mark.

"What, no grown folks with you?" cried the strange youth.

"Don't you think we can get through?" questioned Bob.

"Mother didn't think I could get through. Said the journey was too rough."

"Oh, were you thinking of going?" asked Mark, in surprise.

"Yes. In fact, I haven't thought of anything else since the news came in. You see, we're poor over our way, and father isn't very well, and I'd like to go to California and make some money to send home to the folks."

"It's a long journey," said Bob, and now he looked the strange boy over more carefully. He was well set up, and looked as if he could stand almost any amount of knocking round.

"I don't care how long the trip is."

"Say, if you are acquainted around here, maybe you could put us on the track of buying a cheap but good wagon," said Mark.

"A wagon? Why, we've got a wagon father may let you have—if it's good enough. We don't use it any more."

"Will you show it to us?"

"Certainly. Come on."

The boy led the way, and as they walked on he introduced himself. His name was Silas Williams, although he said everybody called him plain Si. He was the oldest of eight children,

and his parents had emigrated from New Jersey to Missouri six years before.

The Williams farm proved to be in fairly good condition, although the lack of money to do with was plainly evident. They found Mr. Williams sitting by the kitchen door, nursing a leg that was rheumatic. Two boys were at work over a chopping block, and a girl was weeding a garden patch.

"These boys want to see the red wagon," said Si. "Perhaps they'll buy it. They want a wagon for the trip to California."

"All right," answered Mr. Williams. "They can have it for forty dollars and not a cent less. But why didn't their men folks come over?"

"They haven't any men folks, father; they are going it alone."

"Gee shoo! Oh, well, show the wagon to 'em."

Si led the way to a shed and rolled the red wagon into view. A glance told Mark and Bob that the wagon was a fair one and in good repair.

"There's a top for it—up in the barn loft," said Si. "But it's full of holes and will have to be mended."

"Well, I guess we could mend it," answered Mark. "But don't you think forty dollars is a good price?" He was growing as cautious as was Bob.

"Father wants forty dollars—I don't think he'll take less. Still you might ask him."

They examined the wagon with care and ran it around the yard of the farm. Then they walked back to where Mr. Williams was sitting.

"I'll give twenty-five dollars for the wagon," said Bob.

"Make it thirty-five dollars and it's yours."

"No, twenty-five."

"Then split the difference and call it thirty dollars," said Mr. Williams, and this was the selling price finally agreed upon. The boys said they would bring the mule around the next morning and take the vehicle away.

"Sit down and tell me about your plans," said Mr. Williams, after the money had been paid over. And a talk lasting over an hour followed. They were joined by Mrs. Williams and her daughter Bess, who was a year younger than Si.

"If they can do that, pa, I don't see why our Si can't do it," said Bess. "He's just as big and every bit as strong. Why don't you let Si go?"

"Maybe you'd like to take me in as a partner," said Si, with a longing look in his clear blue eyes. "I'd be willing to do my full share of the work, I can vouch for that!"

"Si's heart has been set on going for a long time," came from Mrs. Williams, a modest little

woman with a pale face. "I shouldn't mind it if we had plenty of money and could give him a good outfit. But to start off with next to nothing——" She ended with a sigh.

"We are starting off with little enough," answered Bob. "We've got a mule and the wagon, and a little tent, and we are going to buy some provisions and firearms, and then we'll be pretty low on cash, I can tell you."

"I do want to go so much," said Si. "I've been planning it every day. Father, you could afford to give me the wagon, couldn't you?"

"Why, it's sold!"

"Then the price of it—and maybe some provisions. Then if they'll have me——" He paused and looked at Mark and Bob.

"We might take you," answered Bob, slowly. "We'd want to talk it over first."

"Why can't you come over to the house!" burst out Si, eagerly. "Bring the mule over and your tent. We've got a spare room——"

"For the mule?" asked Mark.

"Oh, the idea!" shrieked Bess, and then a general laugh followed.

"You know what I mean," continued Si. "Come on over, please!"

"All right, we'll come," answered Bob, after a nod from Mark.

"I'll help you move," said the farm boy, and walked back to camp with them. Soon the tent was taken down, and the outfit strapped to Darling's back, and an hour later found them installed at the Williams homestead.

Mark and Bob found their new friends very agreeable. Though the house was scantily furnished, it was scrupulously clean, and the meals served by Mrs. Williams and Bess beat the camp meals "all to pieces," as Mark declared. In the evening they talked the California matter over once more, and resumed it in the morning.

"I think I can buy your provisions for you at a reasonable figure," said Mr. Williams. "And I've got a shotgun here I guess we can spare, and I know where you can get a rifle, if you want one."

"We have some beans we can spare—and some sides of bacon," put in Mrs. Williams.

"Could you put in those things as Si's share?" asked Bob.

"Yes, yes, please do!" shouted Si, rushing over to his parent. "Hurrah! It's settled that I am to go after all!" He threw up his old straw hat.

"Not so fast, Si," broke in his father. "You ain't real sure that they want you."

Si stopped short and he looked pleadingly at Bob and Mark.

"Tell him he can go," whispered Mark to his chum.

"Why, Si can go if he can bear his share of the expense," said Bob. "I know Mark and I will like first-rate to have him along."

"Bully for you!" said Si, and rushing up he shook hands with both boys. "Oh, we are bound to get through somehow, and find a lot of gold, too!" he added.

"To be sure we'll get through," returned Mark. "But the next time you shake hands please don't squeeze my fingers quite so hard." He had found the country boy's grip a tough one.

"Si can do the real hard work," came from one of the little Williams boys. "He can split wood, an'—an' everything!"

"Yes, I'll split the wood, and do a lot besides—if only I go," said Si, and then in sheer delight he swung his little brother on high. "And just wait till I get back, Benny," he went on. "You shall have a lot of toys, and mother a silk dress, and Bess those music lessons, and father——"

"Oh, I'll sit all day long and figure up what the nuggets are worth," finished Mr. Williams, with a laugh. "Well, boys, now it's settled, I wish all of you luck, and there's my hand on it." And he shook hands all around.

CHAPTER VIII

OFF FOR THE LAND OF GOLD

It was astonishing how quickly the three boys got to liking one another. Inside of two days Bob and Mark felt as if they had known Si for a long time. Si was a real worker, they could easily see that, and given to look at the hard, practical side of things. He went over their list with care, and so did Mr. and Mrs. Williams, and some things were added and others dropped out. The shotgun was cleaned up, and they went to the store for the rifle, and for the balance of the provisions and the ammunition. They likewise purchased a small box filled with necessary medicines.

It was decided that the start should be made on the following Monday morning, and the three boys spent all of Saturday in completing their arrangements. Bob and Mark had purchased some extra underwear, and Mrs. Williams mended the garments belonging to her son. Sunday was a day of complete rest.

The route to be taken for the first stage of the journey was from Independence to Fort Leavenworth, and then along the Platte River westward to Fort Laramie. When the latter place was gained they were to decide how to proceed further.

"You must take good care of yourselves," said Mr. Williams, when it came time to leave. "Don't run into unnecessary danger."

"We will be careful," answered Mark.

"Si, I'd rather have you come home without gold than be killed," put in Mrs. Williams, looking with motherly fondness at her son.

The children gathered around and tears stood in Bess's eyes, for she thought a great deal of her brother. Then the mule was started up and off they went, with Bob on the seat of the wagon, and Mark trudging on foot on one side and Si on the other.

The three young adventurers were off for the gold fields at last!

For quarter of a mile they had the side road to themselves. But then they turned into the main road and soon became one of a long procession of turnouts of various kinds and sizes, from the monstrous prairie "houses" with four horses, to the little pushcarts which some individuals were pushing soberly and diligently. It was cal-

culated that already four to five thousand people were on the trail between Independence and Laramie!

"Gracious, this looks as if a whole town was moving out!" exclaimed Mark, as he gazed ahead and then behind. As far as eye could reach he could see an endless procession of wagons and cattle moving slowly across the prairies. The movement was all in one direction—westward—to the Land of Gold!

"Not much chance of getting lost here," said Bob. "Too many lighthouses," and he pointed to the white covers of the wagons, which shone brightly in the sunlight.

"We don't want to get lost," came from Si. "We don't want to lose any time that way, or all the best claims will be taken before we get to California."

"Oh, California is so large it will take years to fill it with people," declared Mark. "Just the same, I want to get there as quickly as anybody," he hastened to add.

At noon they shifted to one side of the trail, and stopped for dinner and to feed the mule. Darling had done well and Bob patted him affectionately.

"We're friends, aren't we, Darling?" said the sailor boy, and rubbed his face along the mule's

head. The animal looked wise, shifted his ears, and gave a low heehaw of pleasure.

"Bob's courting the mule," laughed Mark.

"He's all right, Mark."

"I know he is."

Si was gathering dry grass and wood for the fire and soon had a blaze started. The meal was a short one, but they enjoyed it thoroughly. They were finishing up when a well-built man, bronzed by exposure to the elements, sauntered up.

"Boys, kin ye spare an old hunter a cup o' coffee?" he asked. "I had some, but the canister got busted an' the coffee is layin' all the way from Ten-Mile Stake to here!"

"Yes, there is just one cup left," said Mark. "Here you are," and he poured it into a tin dipper the old hunter carried. The man sat down, opened a haversack and brought forth some bread and meat, and began his meal.

"My name's Dixon," he said. "Hank Dixon, although most o' the boys call me Maybe Dixon, although I don't know why, exceptin' maybe it pleases 'em to call me so. I see you three lads are travelin' alone. I'm travelin' alone, too. I hope to git to the Land o' Gold some day, but maybe I won't make it."

"The name Maybe hits him true enough," whispered Mark.

"Maybe you won't mind havin' me travel along with you," went on the man. "It's more sociable-like than travelin' alone."

"Why, yes, come along," said Bob.

"All right then—jest as soon as I've covered this hunk o' bread an' meat an' washed 'em down with that coffee. It's good coffee, I kin smell it—none o' your third-rate Rio!" And he took a gulp and smacked his lips.

"Where are you from, Mr. Dixon?" asked Si.

"Whoop! Don't call me mister, onless you want me to have a fit. Call me plain Dixon, or Maybe Dixon if thet suits better. I'm from 'most any old place. I war born in Vermont, raised in Pennsylvania, emigrated to Ohio at the age o' twelve or thirteen, went down South when I was eighteen, got married in Georgia, settled down in North Carolina, moved over to Kentucky, lost my wife in Iowa, an' now I'm here an' bound fer Californy."

"Gracious! You need a geography to find yourself!" cried Mark, and began to laugh. "I suppose when you get to California you'll be moving over to China."

"No, these ere United States is good enough fer me to roam around in. I want to see the hull o' my own country. afore I trot along to fureign parts."

"Haven't you any outfit?" asked Si.

"Such as it is, a big bundle an' a stick. It's behind yonder rise o' ground," answered Maybe Dixon. "Whar be you from, as they ask down to Vermont?" And when they told him he nodded several times. "A good mixture—and it's mixtures what I like. Maybe we can make the journey right through together, eh?"

"We'll see," answered Bob, briefly, and started up the wagon. The other boys followed, and presently Maybe Dixon joined them, carrying over his shoulder a big bundle done up in an old red and white tablecloth.

"This here tablecloth was a weddin' present to my late departed wife," said he. "I keep it in memory o' the best woman thet ever breathed the breath o' life. Maybe it ain't so bright an' beautiful as it once was, but thet can't be helped. Besides, it was the only thing I had to wrap my load in when I started out."

That day saw them twenty-five miles on their journey, and when night came they were glad to rest themselves. They put up the tent close to the wagon and slept under the shelter of both, and Dixon laid himself down near by.

"Jest as soon sleep in the open, if it ain't rainin'," he said. "The fresh air is fine."

"I suppose I'll get used to it after a while," an-

swered Mark. "But for the present I'm going to use the tent."

Maybe Dixon departed early in the morning, but came back before breakfast with a small bag of coffee under his arm.

"Struck luck," he explained. "Met a feller as had more coffee nor he wanted. Sez he, 'Got any terbacker to spare?' Sez I, 'Got any coffee ter spare?' An' then we made a dicker. It's putty good coffee, too, by the smell," and it was good, as they soon afterwards learned.

Four days of traveling found the boys and Maybe Dixon well on their way. The rolling prairies were ahead and behind them, and not far away the river glistened brightly in the sunshine. They had come up to Josiah Socket and his family and that individual was glad to see them.

"Might as well travel along with them as knows you," said Socket, and kept on directly behind the boys. Mrs. Socket was also glad to see them and it was all they could do to steer clear of the everlasting clatter of her tongue.

"She means well, but her tongue would be the death of me," said Bob. "Puts me in mind of a windmill that never stops." Yet as the days went by and they got further and further west the woman quieted down greatly, much to the satisfaction of all around her.

On Saturday night the boys went into camp close to the Platte, at a pleasant spot where there was an inlet and a grove of trees. Here in a convenient shelter they took a bath and rested.

"We'll feel as fresh as ever by Monday morning," said Mark. "And Darling will feel rested too."

"Monday mornin'?" queried Maybe Dixon. "Don't ye calkerlate to move on Sunday?"

"No, we are not going to travel on Sunday," answered Bob. He had settled this point with Si and Mark the day previous.

"Well! Thar ain't many a-restin'."

"We shall," put in Mark. "You can go ahead if you wish. Don't let us keep you."

"No, sirree! I ain't much on religion, I ain't, but if Sunday's goin' to be a day o' rest, so be it," answered Maybe Dixon. "Maybe 'twill do us a heap o' good anyway."

Before the boys and Dixon retired for the night a man, dressed in a suit of black and carrying a bundle of tracts, came to them.

"There will be preaching on the Lord's Day at the tent with the blue and white flag," said he. "All are invited. Preaching at ten o'clock and at three."

"Let us go," said Si, and the others agreed. Sunday dawned bright and fair, and when they

arrived at the "gospel tent" they found quite a crowd assembled. Seats had been placed for the women and children, while the men stood up in the rear. The sermon was short but to the point, and half a dozen familiar hymns were sung. The hat was passed around, and everybody gave something.

"That's real home-like," said Bob. "It shows that folks have the right feelings, even if they are hundreds of miles from home."

"It was splendid," returned Mark. The singing especially had pleased him.

"I'm going every Sunday, if I get the chance," put in Si. "I ain't going to be a heathen, even if I am on the trail."

CHAPTER IX

A STORM AND A WASHOUT

A WEEK passed and the young gold hunters found themselves well on the trail to Fort Laramie, which was to be their next regular stopping place. The route was along the northern bank of the Platte River, which they had crossed at a spot where the stream was broad but shallow. The wagon had been taken over on a flatboat, at a cost of two dollars. Darling had been made to swim over to the other side, much against his wishes. In going down into the river the mule had done a tremendous lot of splashing, wetting Bob, who was riding him, from head to foot.

"That mule is a cantankerous critter," observed Maybe Dixon, who chanced to be near at the time. "One thing is certain, he ain't no Baptist!"

"I guess he'd rather take a roll than take a bath," said Mark, and he was right; as soon as Darling came out of the river, he shook himself and then started to roll. It was a good quarter

of an hour before Bob, aided by Si, could hook him up once more.

The weather had been fair during the week and the boys had managed to get a little rough washing done on the way. But on Sunday night it commenced to rain and blow, until all were glad enough to seek the shelter which the tent and the wagon afforded.

"If ye want my advice, take down the tent an' put it over yer wagon," said Maybe Dixon. "Maybe it won't blow an' maybe it will. But it's allers wise to be on the safe side."

"Do you think the wind will get worse?" questioned Mark.

"It has a habit o' doing sech things out here."

The wind was already rising, and not wishing to have the canvas torn to shreds, the boys decided to follow Dixon's advice. It was no easy matter to take the tent down, and one wet end slashed around poor Si, hurling him to the ground and turning him over and over.

"Hi! let me out o' this!" gasped the country youth. "I don't want to be bagged up just yet." And as Mark unwound the canvas he staggered to his feet. "Gosh all hemlock! But it's blowing, ain't it!"

To get the canvas over the wagon was a second

difficulty, but at last it was accomplished. Then they stretched several ropes over the wagon wheels and pinned them down, that the vehicle might be kept from blowing over. The rain was now coming down in sheets and they were glad enough to get out of it again, although, as Si remarked, "They couldn't get any wetter if they tried."

"One thing is certain, when it rains here it rains," said Bob. "It don't fool about it."

"Bob, this would be a hard one on the ocean," came from Mark.

"Right you are, my hearty," answered the former sailor boy. "I've been in 'em—more than once—an' I know. I was in such a blow once when we were out after an old cow whale, and the small boat didn't get back to the vessel until noon of the next day. All of us thought we were surely bound for Davy Jones's locker."

It rained and blew so hard the entire night that sleep was out of the question. Mark tried it shortly after midnight and soon roused up with a start.

"The waterfall! Look out for the waterfall!" he cried, and then gazed around stupidly. "Gracious! I got to dreaming and dreamt I was under a waterfall!" he gasped.

"And you were," answered Bob, roaring with

laughter. "The rain came through that hole and poured right down on your nose."

Maybe Dixon was under the wagon, resting on a small platform of logs. In the middle of the night they heard him splashing around.

"What's the trouble down there?" called out Si.

"Trouble is, I don't care to drown," declared Dixon. "The water is 'bout up to the hubs already, an' maybe it will soon be higher than thet."

"Then we must be in a hollow," cried Mark. "If so, we'll have to get out, or all of our stores may get wet."

There was no help for it, and tired, wet, and disgusted, all crawled forth into the darkness of the night. They did not bother to hitch up the mule, but with two in front and two behind, pushed and hauled the wagon to a higher spot. Here were a few sturdy young trees which had not been affected by the wind, and they tied fast to these.

"If going to California was all like this, I'd be for turning back right now," declared Mark, as he wiped the water from his face.

"Ditto here," came from Bob, who was wringing out his jacket. "But don't worry, the sun will shine again."

"An' be good an' hot too, don't forget that," put in Si.

About four o'clock in the morning the wind gradually died down and the rain slackened up. Then one after another did what he could to make himself comfortable and get a few winks of sleep. But it was a sorry-looking crowd that gathered outside three hours later.

"I'd like to have some of that hot sunshine right now," said Mark to Si. The sky was still heavy and threatening.

It was difficult to obtain firewood dry enough to burn, and they wasted several precious matches in starting a blaze. But once the fire was going they heaped on the wood and then dried themselves as best they could. They also made a generous pot of coffee, which they emptied while it was steaming.

"Coffee is the thing to warm a feller up," said Si. "Beats liquor all holler." And Mark and Bob nodded in affirmation.

They did not move on until after dinner. By that time the sky had cleared and the sun was peeping from behind what was left of the clouds. But the trail was wet and heavy and they had to make many a detour, to avoid mud-holes and dangerous washouts.

"Hullo, look at this!" cried Mark, when they

were looking for a camping spot for the night. "Socket's in trouble, sure!"

He was right, Josiah Socket was indeed in trouble. His wagon had gone deep down into a mud-hole, with Mrs. Socket and the girls on board. On the outer edge of the hole stood Josiah and his three boys, gazing at the disaster in dismay and wondering how the females and the outfit were to be rescued.

"Jest like you, Josiah Socket!" Mrs. Socket was saying, as she stood up on the front step and waved her arms in the air. "It's a wonder me an' the gals didn't all tumble in the mud or git our necks broke! Sech a careless man I never did see in all my born days! Now what are we going to do, answer me that?"

"I don't know, Ann," answered the husband, meekly.

"We can't sit here all day, nor stand nuther!"

"You can jump out if you want to."

"Land sakes alive! Jump out in all that mud! Ain't you ashamed to suggest sech a thing? If you was a man that was a-looking out for your own, you'd—you'd——"

"What would I do, Ann?"

"You'd do something, that's what you'd do. I shan't stay here, that is all there is to it!"

"Maybe I kin git a board an' help you out that

way," said Josiah Socket, and gazed around helplessly; for nothing like a board was anywhere in sight.

"Carry 'em over," suggested Maybe Dixon. "I'll take one o' the gals, if she'll let me." And he waded into the mud.

Josiah Socket was willing enough to follow the advice given, and he plunged into the mud. His wife was doubtful about trusting herself on his shoulder, but at last took the seat with many cautions.

"If ye slip down, Josiah Socket, I'll never forgive ye," she declared. "Never, in all this wide world!"

"I ain't a-goin' to slip down," he muttered, stubbornly, and he did not. Soon the lady was safe by the side of the trail and so were the two girls, Maybe Dixon bringing over one and Bob the younger miss.

"I feel like leaving the blamed outfit where it is," grumbled Josiah Socket, in deep disgust. "I'm sick o' emigratin' to Californy."

"Don't leave it where it is," said Maybe Dixon. "If so, maybe 'twill sink through to Chiny."

"I think we can help haul you out," said Bob. "Come, Mark, help splice a rope on here, and we'll tow his bark out of that hole in jig time."

The rope was produced and made fast to the

back of the boys' wagon, and horses and mule were started up. The boys hauled and so did the men, and at last, with a deep sound of suction, the Socket outfit came up out of the mud-hole and was dragged to a spot that was high and dry.

"Good fer you!" cried Josiah Socket, his face brightening wonderfully, now that the difficulty was over. "Tell ye wot, many hands make short work, don't they?"

"I'll reward you boys," said Mrs. Socket. "I'm going to bake to-morrow—pervidin' it don't rain,—and I'll give you some fresh loaves of bread."

"Good enough!" cried Mark. "I've been longing for fresh bread—the real kind, I mean, since we left Si's home."

"Ditto here," put in Bob. "The kind we've been turning out ain't any better than hardtack, if as good."

"Mother certainly knows how to bake bread," put in Si, softly, and then a far-away look came into his eyes as he thought of the home so many miles eastward. He could picture the others gathered around the family board, eating supper—and perhaps talking about him. He had a little streak of homesickness go over him, and to work it off set about pitching camp for the night and building a fire for the evening meal.

Many things were still wet and the boys were

glad to find that plenty of firewood was handy, so that a generous blaze was started, and kept up a good part of the night, drying things out thoroughly. The Sockets camped close at hand, and in the morning the promised bread was baked and delivered. It was certainly good and the boys did not hesitate to say so. This pleased Mrs. Socket and she said she would bake them bread another time, providing they would furnish the flour.

CHAPTER X

AT FORT LARAMIE

"BOB, what is that tall rock ahead of us?"

"I don't know, Mark."

"That is what they call Chimney Rock," put in Si. "Maybe Dixon was telling me about it. It won't be long now before we reach the top of the ridge and then we'll get our first sight of the Rocky Mountains."

The young gold hunters found the vicinity of Chimney Rock very beautiful, and that day they rested at a point where they could look for a good many miles around them. Chimney Rock was of soft stone, several hundred feet high, a well-defined landmark on that strange trail. Beyond it were a series of bluffs.

"Now we are going to get our first sight of the Rockies," said Mark, some days later, after another rain. "The storm cleared the air, so we ought to get a pretty good view."

They were close to the top of the ridge, along

which they had traveled slowly and laboriously, for the road was nothing like what it is to-day, with its many towns and villages. The boys could not wait, and Mark and Si rushed on ahead of Bob, who was driving the mule.

"Hurrah! Here we are!" shouted Mark, throwing up his cap. "The mountains, as plain as day!"

The mountains were certainly there, but so far off that they were a mere blue-and-white blur in the distance. The tops were lost in the clouds, and this caused Si to draw a deep breath.

"It ain't going to be an easy task climbing over them," was his sober comment.

"Want to go back?" asked Mark, quickly.

"No! It's California or bust with me!" answered the farm boy, quickly. "Why, if I went back now, I'd never be able to look father and mother in the face again," he added.

Presently Darling came plodding up to the top of the ridge, with Bob trudging alongside of the wagon. Bob's face broke into a grin as he viewed the scene beyond.

"Are those the Rockies?" he asked.

"Yes," said both of the other boys.

"Good enough, we'll soon be over 'em," answered the former sailor boy, softly. "Ain't that so, Darling?" he added, to the mule. The animal

laid back his ears, blinked one eye, and gave a gentle heehaw for an answer.

They spent the rest of the day on the ridge and early the next day started on the direct trail for Fort Laramie. The trail was now crowded and they had plenty of company. Many of the folks along the trail called them the Boy Triplets, because they were always seen together. Strangers were astonished when they learned that the boys had not known each other previous to starting on the trip.

"You certainly pull well together," said one pioneer, as he journeyed along with them for several miles. "No quarrelin' or nothin', eh?"

"None so far," answered Mark.

"Must all have good natures. I had a partner, but we didn't hitch a week. When I wanted to do one thing he always wanted to do something else."

"We know just what we want to do and we are going to do it," put in Bob. "We haven't got time to quarrel."

At last they reached Fort Laramie, called by some of the pioneers and trappers Fort John. It was a quadrangular building, built of rough bricks. The walls had watch towers and were defended by several brass cannon. It was located where the Laramie River flowed into the Platte,

six hundred and seventy-two miles from Independence.

"We've done some traveling since we started," said Mark, when he heard the distance mentioned.

"That leaves us a little over fifteen hundred miles still to cover," said Si. "Boys, we are getting there."

"The worst of it is," put in Bob, "nearly all of the rest of the journey is uphill—that is, till we get over the top of the Rockies. It is going to be a long, hard pull, if I know anything about it."

A great many emigrants were encamped around Fort Laramie, taking a brief rest before setting out on the next stage of their arduous journey. Trappers, hunters, and traders were numerous, and not a few gambling places were in full blast. Some of these resorts were open day and night, and not a few of the men who went in to play lost all they possessed. The very night the boys arrived there was some excitement over a young man who had just committed suicide.

"He went an' gambled away his last dollar and then gambled away his hoss an' his hull outfit," explained one of the men to Mark. "That discouraged him, and he threw himself into the river with a bag of sand tied to his neck."

"Horrible!" murmured the boy, and shuddered.

"The gambling fever is fearful when it gets into your veins," went on the man. "I had it once and I know."

The gaming tables had a great fascination for Maybe Dixon, and soon he was putting up what little money he possessed, much to the boys' distress, for they thought a good deal of the man "from everywhere."

"Better give it up," said Bob to Dixon. "You are bound to lose."

"Not if they play fair," answered Maybe Dixon. "But maybe they don't give a feller a square deal. There's one chap I don't trust much—a feller from the south named Sag Ruff. He looks like a sharper. But he has got some o' my money already, an' I am bound to win it back, or my name ain't Dixon."

"Better leave him alone," said Mark. "If he is a swindler he will surely take all he can from you."

"I'll stake against him once more," said Dixon, determinedly.

Curious to see what might happen to Maybe Dixon, Mark watched his chance that evening and followed the man to the gambling shanty, which was located on the outskirts of the temporary settlement. The gambling table was a packing box with several smooth boards nailed to the top, and

rude benches took the place of chairs. At one end of the table rested a tallow candle, and on the wall swung a smoking oil lamp.

A dozen men were present, some clean-cut and honest-looking and the others of all degrees of roughness. Sag Ruff was a burly fellow of forty, with a shock of red hair and a red beard. He had a harsh voice, and when he spoke it was frequently with biting sarcasm.

"Now, if you have nerve, step up, but if you are afraid, go home," he said to the crowd. "The game is an honest one, gents, but it takes nerve to play it."

"I'm in with you," said Maybe Dixon. "Told you I'd come, last night."

"So you did," answered Sag Ruff. His full first name was Sagamore, but all called him Sag for short.

The game was soon on. Mark could not follow very well, as he took no interest in cards. But he saw that Maybe Dixon was losing after the first game had been played.

"Once more," said Sag Ruff, after Dixon had lost several times.

The money went up on the table—the last fifty dollars which Maybe Dixon possessed—and the game proceeded. In the midst of the game Mark, shifting his position unknown to Sag Ruff, saw

the gambler stick one card up his coat sleeve and produce another from his inner pocket.

"Sag wins!" shouted several, a minute later.

"And that busts me!" groaned Maybe Dixon. "Hang the luck, anyhow!" And he arose to go away.

"Wait a minute," said Mark, in a clear voice. "I want something explained."

"Hullo, Mark, I didn't know you were here."

"Did that man have a right to shove one card up his sleeve and substitute another from his pocket?"

"Did he what?" roared Maybe Dixon.

Mark repeated his question.

"Certainly not."

"Well, that is what he did do," went on the youth.

At this declaration several cries rang out, and a dozen began to speak at once. Sag Ruff glared at the boy as if he wanted to eat Mark up.

"What are you talking about?" he growled. "You're dreaming."

"I am not dreaming. I saw you put one card from your hand up your sleeve and then bring another card from your inside pocket."

"Never!"

"You did."

"See here, boy, do you want to get shot?"

blustered Sag Ruff, and made a movement as if to draw a pistol. But ere he could raise a weapon Maybe Dixon had his own pistol out and leveled at the gambler's head.

"No shootin' jest yet, Sag Ruff. This boy always tell the truth."

"He does not."

"I say he does. I thought as how you was cheatin' me, but I couldn't get on to the game. Before we drop this matter, you'll please take off thet coat."

"I won't."

"I say he will. Ain't that so, men?"

"If he's honest he won't mind taking off the coat," answered one burly emigrant.

"Take it off," added two others.

"I am not going to," growled Sag Ruff, and it was plain to see that he was greatly disturbed.

Hardly had he spoken when he found himself covered by half a dozen pistols, some small and some extra large. He began to tremble, thinking he was to be shot down on the spot.

"Now take it off an' be quick about it," went on Maybe Dixon. "I'll count ten. One, two, three, four, five——"

"Wait, I'll take it off!" burst out the gambler, and began to take off the coat with care. Seeing

this, an old miner pulled the garment from him, and out of the sleeve dropped a playing card.

"The four of clubs!" cried Maybe Dixon. "Boys, look through that pack we were playing with."

Three men did so, sorting out the cards as they went along. Soon came another excited cry:

"Here are two queen of hearts!"

"The card he brought from his pocket!"

"He is a swindler of the worst sort!"

"He must have cheated me!"

"And me too!"

"He got fifty dollars from me!"

"A hundred and ten from me!"

"Let us make him shell out!"

"We will make him shell out!" said Maybe Dixon, firmly. "He has got to pay us back every cent he took from us." He turned to Sag Ruff. "Will you do it—or will you have this?" And he shook the pistol in the gambler's face.

"I'll pay up," answered the swindler, weakly. "Don't shoot me, and I'll give up to the very last penny!"

CHAPTER XI

SAG RUFF'S THREAT

FOR the time being the excitement was high in the gambler's shack and Mark thought that somebody would surely be shot. The men present affirmed that they had lost about a thousand dollars between them, whereas Sag Ruff had only nine hundred dollars on hand with which to make a settlement.

"Where is the rest of the money?" demanded one man.

"Lost it," answered the gambler. "Fellow named Hi Wilson got it from me."

"I reckon that's right," said another. "He played with Hi night before last and Hi went off with over three hundred dollars. He was too sharp-eyed for this rascal."

"I'll fix this," said Maybe Dixon. "He owes us one thousand. Nine hundred is a thousand with ten per cent. off, as the schoolmasters say. Everybody gits wot is comin' to him less ten per cent. Ain't I right, Perfesser?" The last to a

man who had once taught in Yale College, and who was now as eager to hunt gold as anybody.

"That is correct," answered the professor, with a nod of his bald head.

"Make the Perfesser the bookkeeper," said another man, and this was done, and in a very few minutes the money was divided in the proper ratio. During the proceedings the gambler looked glum. He gave Mark a savage glance.

"I'll remember you, sonny!" he hissed, in a low tone.

"I'll remember you too," answered Mark, but the gambler's remark caused him to shiver. He knew that Sag Ruff was angry enough to kill him if given the opportunity.

It was after midnight, yet the camp was alive with people. The news had spread that somebody had exposed a swindler, and a crowd began to collect. Sag Ruff wanted to run away, but Maybe Dixon and some of the others would not let him go.

"We are not done with you," said one man.

"Why not? I've given up all I've got," growled the swindler.

"We are going to teach you a lesson," said another.

"Ride him on a rail!"

"Duck him in the river!"

These and several other suggestions rang out. Torches were procured, and in a few minutes one man found a long tent pole, which answered very well for a rail. Sag Ruff was hoisted on this and marched through the camp. Then he was taken to a pond filled with dirty water and tumbled in head first.

"Now don't show your face on this trail again!" shouted several.

"If you do you'll be shot!" added several others.

Filled with rage and fear, Sag Ruff dragged himself from the pond and hurried out of sight behind a nearby row of tents. As he went on he had to pass the outfit belonging to our friends. He caught sight of Mark just going into the tent.

"Look here, sonny!" he hissed, in a voice full of hate and bitterness. "I shan't forget you, and some day I'll square up! Don't forget, I'll square up!" And then the darkness of the night swallowed up his form.

"Who is there?" asked Si, rousing up in his sleep.

"It is all right, Si, I'm just getting back."

"Oh, all right, Mark. Did you see anything worth seeing?"

"I did—and I saved Maybe Dixon some money.

But I guess I've made a bitter enemy and one who is bound to do me an injury if he possibly can."

"I thought I heard some shouting," said the country boy, as he sat up in the darkness. "What was it all about?"

"I'll tell you in the morning. No use of waking Bob. I know he is tired," answered Mark, and then he turned in beside his chums. But it was all of an hour before he could get to sleep, and then he dreamed that he was out in a shower of playing cards and Sag Ruff was pursuing him with a big butcher knife. He awoke with a start, to find himself bathed from head to feet in a cold perspiration.

In the morning he told his two friends the particulars of what had occurred. He was just finishing the recital when Maybe Dixon hove into sight, with a broad smile on his rather leathery features.

"This is the boy as done it!" he cried, slapping Mark on the back. "Showed up the meanest swindler this camp ever struck."

"Where is Sag Ruff?" asked Mark.

"Gone,—an' he won't dare show his face on this trail ag'in, to my way o' thinkin'."

"I am sure I don't want to see him again."

"He'll turn up some day, when you least ex-

pect it," said Bob, and told the truth, as later events proved.

"Mark, I owe ye something for saving my money," went on Dixon.

"I don't want anything," was the prompt answer.

"The boys got together after the rail-ridin' an' duckin' was over," went on Maybe Dixon. "They made up a purse. Here it is—and you've got to take it."

Dixon handed over the "purse," which proved to be a red bandana handkerchief. Inside was a card on which were written the names of sixteen men who had contributed to the fund. With the card was sixty dollars, in bills and silver.

"You've got to keep it," said the man "from everywhere." "If ye don't the boys will be mad."

"All right, I'll keep it, then," said Mark. "I am very much obliged and I'll tell them so, when I meet them." And he kept his word. The sixty dollars came in very handy, for funds all around were running low again.

Sunday was spent at Fort Laramie, and bright and early Monday morning they took again to the trail, which now led across some broad stretches of prairie lands, dotted here and there with clumps of trees and bushes. Soon they were along the

Platte once again, and then they left the immediate vicinity of the river and took to the dry bed of a stream which had once been a good-sized body of water. By Wednesday they were again ascending a ridge.

"We'll be getting to the foothills soon," said Mark. "Then is when the real climbing will begin."

"Not to say anything about when we reach the real mountains," put in Bob. "They say some of the spots are fearful."

"The question is, are we going through this fall or are we going to wait until next spring?" came from Si. "We've got to do one thing or tudder."

"Oh, don't let us wait," said Mark, impatiently.

"I don't know as we can afford to wait," added the former sailor boy. "We haven't any too much money, and if we remain here all winter we'll be stranded in the spring, so far as money is concerned."

The boys talked it over several nights, while seated around the camp-fire. They learned that Socket was going through without delay, and also several other emigrants with families.

"If those fellows can get through with women and children we ought to be able to get through," said Mark.

"Maybe they won't get through," said Maybe Dixon, who was present. "More'n one pusson has lost his life on a mountain trail in snowy weather."

"I know that," answered Bob. "But I, for one, am pretty tough. When I was whaling I was often out in the north seas in a blinding snow-storm and always got back to the ship in safety."

"All the same, I reckon a howling snowstorm in the mountains is not to be sneezed at," said Si, with a shake of his head.

There was a general pause.

"Do we go, or don't we?" asked Mark, boldly. "I say go on."

"So do I."

"We'll risk it."

And so it was decided. Maybe Dixon said he would accompany them, and made out a list of what he thought they ought to take along on the long and perilous climb over the Rockies.

The roads so far had been fair, but now they often struck barren spots and places where it was next to impossible to get good water.

"Gosh, how this smells!" exclaimed Si, on getting a drink one afternoon at a spring.

"There is sulphur in that water, and also magnesia," answered Mark.

"Will it hurt one to drink it?"

"I think not—but I wouldn't drink too much."

The next day they came to another spring, this time of good, cold water. Over the spring was a rude board on which were the words:

Drink Your Fill Here!

Thirty-two Miles to the Next Good Water!

"There's a warning for all," said Si. "I am going to get all I want."

"Yes, and we'll give Darling a good drink too," added Bob.

They filled their water jug, and also the three pails and kettles they carried. To keep the water from slopping from the pails and kettles they covered the vessels with canvas, tied around with strings.

The next day came traveling of the worst kind. The trail was more barren than ever and the hot sun poured down upon them mercilessly. Not a tree of any kind was in sight, sage was on every side, dotting the sand but offering no fodder for the cattle. Even Darling would not look at the sage. He plodded along with his ears laid back and his head bobbing wearily.

That night they did not build a fire but simply lay down to rest in the open, eating a cold and rather dry supper. They kept the last of the

water until morning, and even then saved a few swallows of the precious liquid.

"We'd be pretty bad off if we didn't strike that spring," said Mark. "Think of going a whole day without water!"

"Or two days—in this heat," put in Si. "It's enough to drive one crazy."

Slowly they went on, with a great cavalcade in front and behind them. Noon came and went and the boys calculated that they were still four miles from the spring.

"Never mind, we'll reach it inside of two hours," said Maybe Dixon, hopefully. "But even so, I'd give a dollar this minit fer a good glass o' cold drinkin' water."

"Don't mention it," said Mark. "You make me more thirsty than ever."

On and on they went, until they calculated they must be within half a mile of the precious spring. Then, of a sudden, they heard a commotion ahead of them.

"Something is wrong sure!" cried Bob, and brought Darling to a halt.

There was a cry, taken up by the pioneers one after another, a cry that made the hearts of the three boys sink like lead in their bosoms:

"The spring ahead has gone dry! There isn't a drop of water for any of us!"



WITHOUT WARNING A WHEEL CAME OFF.—P. 101.
Pioneer Boys of the Gold Fields

CHAPTER XII

SUFFERING FROM THIRST

"THE spring gone dry?" cried Si, who was the first to speak.

"And I am as dry as a bone myself!" came from Mark, with something like a groan.

"I guess we are all dry enough," remarked Bob. "Even poor old Darling is suffering."

"Let us go ahead and make certain the report is true," said Mark. "There may be a little water, even if there isn't much."

There was a spark of hope in this remark, and they moved forward once more. But alas! when the spring was gained it was found to be practically dry. There were only a few drops coming from it at a time, and this precious water was dealt out to the women and children.

The boys and Maybe Dixon turned back and formed in a group near the head of Darling, who was looking as wistfully at the spring as anybody.

"Darling, it's too bad, ain't it?" said Bob.

"Tough luck, old man!" And he rubbed his hand along the mule's nose.

"How far to the next spring?" questioned Mark.

This question was on everybody's lips. It was learned that there was, or had been, a small creek six miles further along the trail, but whether this was still running or had dried up during the summer nobody could tell.

"Well, we may as well go on," said Mark. "Every minute wasted here only makes matters worse. The quicker we get to some kind of water the better it will be for us."

"That's true," said Bob. "Forward it is," and he led the mule around half a dozen turnouts ahead of them.

"You'll die on the trail!" cried several. "Better turn back to where you came from."

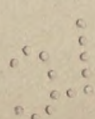
"No, we are bound for California," cried Si.

"California or bust!" added Mark, and Bob said the same.

Josiah Socket was on hand, looking the picture of misery. His family were close at hand, and for a wonder Mrs. Socket had little or nothing to say.

"I think I'll go back," said Socket, dolefully. "We can't afford to die of thirst like this."

"Might as well go ahead," said Maybe Dixon.



"May be more water ahead nor behind." And then Socket concluded to advance, although with a look on his face as if going to his execution.

The advance was slow, for the trail was frightfully cut up and full of rough spots. They had gone less than three miles when without warning a wheel came off, letting down one corner of the wagon and spilling some of the outfit to the ground.

"More troubles!" groaned Bob. "Beats all how they seem to be piling up!"

"Is the axle broken, or the hub?" asked Si, anxiously.

"No, only the nut came off," said Mark.

"And where is the nut?"

"Here's the nut!" cried one of the Socket boys, who was trudging on behind them.

The wheel was put into place again and the nut fastened with the wrench they had brought along. Then they picked up what had fallen out of the wagon and put it in place. All were so tired, hot, and thirsty they did not feel like doing a thing. But Mark braced them up.

"Come, boys, we must get some ginger in us, if we expect to win out!" he cried. "There must be water ahead. Let us tramp on until we reach it."

"Forward it is!" echoed Si, faintly. "But say,

I'd give 'most anything for a dipperful o' water, or buttermilk!"

"I draw the line on buttermilk," said Mark, who knew little of farm life and did not care for the beverage mentioned.

At last they came in sight of the creek—or rather where the creek had been. The water-course was moist but that was all. What little water it had contained had been used up days before.

"Dished!" said Bob, laconically.

"The worst luck yet," murmured Mark.

"Not a smell," came from Si. "I thought we'd get something, even if it was pretty riley."

"Onward it is," said Maybe Dixon. "Don't stop to cry over spilt milk."

"That's the talk," said Mark, and they went on as before.

As it grew towards night they could think of nothing but water. Nobody wanted to rest without a drink of something, no matter how bad. Their tongues were swollen and all were "spitting cotton" as Bob put it. Even poor Darling's tongue hung out and the mule looked the picture of suffering.

"He can't drag the load much further," said Mark. "For two pins I'd cut him loose and let him go on alone."

"If we did that, somebody would come along and steal our outfit," said Si.

"What is it, Sammy?" asked Bob, as one of the Socket boys came running up.

"Pap wants to talk to you," answered Sammy.

They halted, and soon Josiah Socket came plodding along.

"My hosses is tuckered out," said he. "I reckon your mule is too. Can't someone go ahead and see if there is water in sight, while the most of us rest?"

"I'll do it!" cried Mark.

"I'll go along!" added Bob. "Si, you can stay with the outfit. If we find any water we'll come back. And anyway, we'll be back by morning, water or no water."

So it was arranged, and Maybe Dixon said he would go forward with the two boys. No time was lost in starting and they set off at a smart pace, considering how they had been traveling since early morning.

At this point the trail was a broad one—that is, there were a dozen paths to follow, taken by different pioneers, all in search of water on their journey westward. As a consequence, they soon reached a point where nobody was in sight.

"We don't want to get lost," said Bob. "We haven't even got a compass to steer by."

"I think I can remember the trail," said Dixon. "That is, if we don't turn around too many times."

Mark was carrying the shotgun,—in hopes of seeing some small game that he might bring down. Maybe Dixon was armed with a rifle, a weapon he had not used since leaving Independence.

"It's queer we don't meet many Indians," said Mark, as they trudged along. So far they had only met a handful of the red men and these had been little more than beggars.

"I guess they don't want to live in such a dry country as this," answered the former sailor boy. "We may meet them in the mountains."

"Maybe we'll meet 'em when we don't want to," said Dixon, and then he put up his hand. "Look there!" he said, softly.

They gazed in the direction pointed out and saw a small deer running among the sage bushes. Its tongue was hanging from its mouth and it looked hot and thirsty.

"I believe that deer is looking for water!" cried Mark.

"More'n likely, lad," answered Maybe Dixon. "Maybe we'd better follow the critter up instead of shootin' it down."

"A deer ought to be able to scent water a long

way off," said Bob. "Let us follow the animal by all means. Even if it wants to run away, it will go towards the water first."

They followed the deer, that was too tired to do more than lope along at a slow gait. The chase led around a small hillock and then to where some distant trees were growing.

"I believe it is going for water!" cried Mark. "If so, we are in luck."

Soon they were within two hundred feet of the clump of trees, which, they now saw, were backed up by a series of rocks. The deer was out of sight.

"We've lost the deer!" murmured Bob. "But I shan't care if only we find water over there."

"I think we shall," said Maybe Dixon. "But how much remains to be seen."

All broke into a run and soon gained the first of the trees. No water was there and they turned towards the rocks. Then Mark caught sight of a thin stream of water gushing out from between two big stones and set up a shout:

"Water! water!"

"Hurrah!" cried Bob. "Now we can get our fill and carry the news back to camp."

"Hope there is enough to go around," came from Maybe Dixon.

They rushed to where the water was flowing

and found a pool under the stones three feet in diameter and a foot deep. The water was clear but tasted a little of minerals. Yet to the thirsty ones it was the best drink they had ever had.

"Beats all how good water can taste!" said Bob, after getting down and drinking his fill.

"It's the very best ever!" cried Mark, enthusiastically. All his former depression of spirits had left him.

When Maybe Dixon arose he wiped his mouth slowly with the back of his hand.

"It's fit to thank God fer!" he said, and both boys said amen.

The water was so good Mark had to have another drink. In the meantime Maybe Dixon looked again for the deer, but it was out of sight.

"Poor thing!" murmured Bob. "It needed a drink but it wouldn't stop with us around."

"And now it may die of thirst," added Mark.

"I wish we had a pail along. We might take some water back to camp."

"A pailful wouldn't be enough. Come on—we must get the news to the others as soon as we can. They will be worrying every minute while we are gone."

They started to leave the vicinity of the spring when they heard a clatter on the rocks.

"That deer must be coming!" whispered Bob.

"If so, maybe I'll get a shot," said Maybe Dixon.

He raised his hand for silence, and all became quiet. The clatter of hoofs continued, and then came a snort of commingled disappointment and anger. Looking up, they saw a big elk standing and gazing at them. Then another elk appeared and soon a third and a fourth.

"Hullo, what does this mean?" whispered Bob.

"It must be their drinking place," said Mark.
"And they don't like it that we are here."

"Look out! They mean fight!" exclaimed Maybe Dixon, and raising his rifle he fired at the elk nearest to him. The animal staggered and fell over the pool. Then it arose, gave a snort, and plunged with lowered antlers directly for Mark.

CHAPTER XIII

A FIGHT WITH AN ELK

"Look out, Mark, he is coming for you!"

"Jump out of the way, or he'll horn you sure!"

Such were the cries uttered by Bob and Maybe Dixon, as the big elk charged upon Mark.

The boy was taken somewhat by surprise, but he did not lose his presence of mind. He made a quick leap to one side, and the elk struck one of the trees growing close to the pool. Then, before the animal could turn, Mark blazed away with his shotgun, hitting the elk in the side of the head.

"That's the way to do it," said Maybe Dixon, who was reloading with all speed.

The shots had caused the other elk to depart in haste. But the wounded animal was more ugly than ever, and now made a leap for Bob, who had just picked up a heavy stone. The former sailor had let drive, hitting the elk in the nose. Then, as the animal paused once more, Maybe Dixon's rifle spoke up a second time, and a ball passed into

the elk's stomach. The animal fell over with a snort and a grunt and began to paw the air wildly.

"Hurrah! we've got him down!" cried Mark.
"Now let us finish him."

"I am willing," said Bob, and threw another stone, hitting the elk a sharp blow in the skull. Then Mark ran close and discharged the shotgun into the animal's vitals. This finished the elk, and the game gave a final convulsive kick and lay still.

"Now we've got meat as well as water!" cried Mark, when the battle was at an end.

"Load up," said Maybe Dixon, hurriedly. "Those other critters may be around." And Mark did reload. But none of the elk showed themselves, nor did the small deer put in an appearance again.

By their united strength they hoisted the elk's carcass into the branches of a low tree, and then set off on the return to camp. They all felt so happy that the walk back did not bother them, although in the morning Bob complained somewhat of sore feet.

"Water, and all you want!" cried Mark, on entering camp, a little after midnight. "And we've got better news still," he added.

"Did you strike a gold mine?" questioned one of the Socket boys.

"No, we didn't strike a mine, but we struck an elk, and killed him too."

"Then we'll have some fresh meat to-morrow," said Si. "Good enough."

The stars were shining brightly, so it was decided to move on to the spring without delay. Our young friends and the Sockets did so, and were soon followed by at least a score of others. Fortunately the water held out, for which all were thankful. By noon of the next day a hundred pioneers were encamped around the spring, filling their pails and buckets and dishpans. The pool kept filling up steadily, the overflow disappearing in a sink-hole among the trees.

"We must put a sign on the reg'lar trail, pointing to this spring," said Maybe Dixon. "Maybe it will help a whole lot of folks." And the sign was put up before they left that vicinity and remained up all the time that the rush to the gold fields was on.

The elk was cut up in the morning and the meat passed around, the boys and Maybe Dixon getting flour, beans, and coffee in return. Fresh meat was a rarity and the boys enjoyed their steaks and pot roasts exceedingly. In return for an extra juicy steak Mrs. Socket baked them some more bread and also a batch of pancakes which Si declared tasted "like hum."

Once again they passed on, with the same long procession of emigrants before and behind them. Other springs had been found, and soon some heavy rains caused the dried-up springs to flow again, so nobody suffered quite as much from thirst. But now the road was bad and more than once poor Darling and the Socket horses went up to their breasts in the sand and dirt. This made extra work all around and there was constant grumbling all along the line.

"We'll earn all the gold we ever git," said one old man to Mark. "I'm goin' back." And he started for home that very afternoon, and more than a dozen followed. But the majority merely set their teeth and kept on, trusting that in the end they would be well rewarded for their pains.

Two days later Mark fell in with a pioneer he had met several times before. This man, whose name was Bender, nodded pleasantly and walked with Mark for several miles.

"I believe you're the lad that showed up Sag Ruff and his crooked ways," remarked Bender.

"I am."

"I met Ruff three days ago. He feels mighty sore over what happened."

"Is he bound west?" queried Mark.

"Yes, and if I were you I'd keep my eyes peeled for him, lad. He's a bad egg if ever I saw one."

"I know that. He spoke of me, did he?" mused Mark.

"That he did. He said it was the one desire of his life to square up with you."

"He told you that?"

"Oh, no, not me. He wouldn't dare to speak to me—I'd plug him quick. He was talking to a pal of his—fellow by the name of Gannon—Soapy Gannon they call him. He's another bad egg, but too cowardly to be very harmful. Soapy is Ruff's tool for dirty work when there ain't much danger. I was at the camp and overheard the talk between them."

"Then I had better watch out," said Mark, with a serious look on his face.

"Do so by all means. You don't want to take chances with a fellow like Sag Ruff—nor with Soapy Gannon either," went on the man, and then talked of something else.

The taste of fresh meat had made the three boys eager to try their hand at bringing down more game, and one day Mark and Bob took to a side trail, thinking they might stir up some prairie hens if nothing larger. Both had shotguns, having borrowed one weapon from Josiah Socket.

It was a cool, clear day, with a suggestion of fall in the air, and the boys felt in the best of spirits as they hurried along. They had agreed

to meet Si, Dixon, and the Sockets at the ford of a river ten miles further to the westward.

"I can tell you one thing, Bob," said Mark, "this beats sitting in a stuffy office, copying legal papers."

"I can imagine so, Mark. But it's too bad you had to leave under such a cloud."

"Yes, that is the one thing that makes me sad. My step-father will never believe in my innocence."

"Yes, but he can't prove that you took that money."

"No, but it looks black against me."

"Maybe he won't think you guilty—if you come home with a big bag of gold."

"Maybe that's true—as Dixon would say," and Mark smiled faintly. "Mr. Powers thinks a heap of money."

"Well, so do we—or we wouldn't undergo these hardships to get it."

The boys trudged along until they reached the edge of some timber, and here came to a gurgling brook, where they stopped for a drink. They were about to go on, when Bob pointed to some prairie hens, sitting in a bit of a clearing a hundred or more yards away.

"Let us both fire," whispered Mark. "You can fire to the right and I'll fire to the left."

Bob was willing, and creeping a little closer they raised the guns.

"All ready?"

"Yes."

"Then fire!"

Bang! bang! went the two shotguns, almost as one piece, and two of the prairie hens fell over while three more began to flutter around wildly. The others lost no time in disappearing into the timber.

"Come, we must get the wounded ones, too!" cried Bob, and started forward. One was caught with ease and its neck wrung. Then a second flew straight up into Bob's face.

"Hi! get out of that!" screamed poor Bob and tried to beat the fowl off. As he did this Mark caught it from behind and quickly dispatched it. Then Bob caught the other fowl and killed that too; and the brief excitement came to an end.

"Five prairie hens," said Mark, surveying the game. "Not so bad for a start."

"One thing, we won't go back skunked," answered his chum, with a grin.

"Oh, we are going to get a good lot more game than this, Bob."

"I trust so. But 'you can't vos always sometimes dell,' as the Dutchman said," added the former sailor lad.

With the game slung over their shoulders, they advanced into the timber, finding a trail which seemed to run due westward. They had not gone far before they caught sight of a small deer and both went after it on a run, but it got away from them behind some trees.

"We must go ahead with more caution after this," said Mark. "We are making too much noise."

In less than an hour they found themselves in the very heart of the forest. Great trees grew on all sides of them, and the monstrous roots were anything but easy to climb over. In one spot were thick masses of vines, utterly barring their further progress in that direction.

"Say, I don't like this!" exclaimed Bob at last. "This forest is getting thicker and thicker."

"Just my idea," answered Mark. "I thought we would be through to the other side before this."

"It's wider than I imagined. Perhaps it keeps on for miles, Mark."

They came to a halt, not knowing exactly what to do. Then Mark scratched his head.

"Shall we go back, Bob?"

"Not if we can reach that river by going ahead."

"It's pretty dark under these trees."

"So it is."

"Do you know which is west, now that the sun has gone under a cloud?" went on Mark seriously.

"The west? Why—er—the west is—let me see——" Bob looked around in bewilderment.

"Hang me if I know where the west is!" he ejaculated.

"And I am in the same fix."

"That's bad, Mark. Let us go back!"

"I am willing, but where is the trail we were following?"

"I think—let me see—we came around those vines from—No, we didn't—we——"

"Don't you know for certain?"

"No. Do you?"

"I do not."

"Jerusalem! We are lost!"

"Exactly what I think."

CHAPTER XIV

THE STEALING OF THE OUTFIT

SI drove Darling and the outfit down to the ford of the river, and there waited for the return of his two partners. Maybe Dixon was with him and the Socket family were close behind.

"When do you expect the boys back?" asked Josiah Socket, as he drove up and allowed his horses to drink before crossing.

"I suppose they will be along before a great while," answered the former farm lad.

"I hope they shoot something wuth shooting," put in Maybe Dixon.

"There ought to be some game in that big woods," came from Mrs. Socket. "But they have got to know how to handle a gun. Now Josiah can't shoot fer shucks. Once he went after some rabbits and——"

"I can shoot," interrupted Josiah. "But I don't care much for the sport. Well, I'm a-goin' on," he continued, and commenced the task of reaching the other side of the stream. Soon he

was on the other bank and out of sight behind some tall brushwood.

Si watered the mule and unhooked him and then sat down on a grassy bank to rest. Maybe Dixon filled a pipe and fell to smoking.

As the pair sat there they did not notice the arrival of two men on foot at the ford. But the new arrivals saw Dixon and the former farm youth, and one quickly pulled the other out of sight behind some trees.

"What is it, Sag?" asked one of the men. "Spotted some of your enemies?"

"Yes," answered Sag Ruff. "That man yonder, Soapy, is Maybe Dixon."

"Shoo! you don't say," returned Soapy Gannon, softly. "I reckon you don't want to meet him."

"I do not."

"Is that the boy who exposed you?"

"No, it's one of his partners. There are three of them. The other two ought to be around somewhere."

"Wouldn't you like to meet that lad who got you into trouble?"

"Would I?" Sag Ruff's brow grew dark. "Try me and see; that's all, Soapy!"

After that the pair walked behind the trees and drew still closer to where Si and Dixon sat. They

listened to the talk of our friends and presently learned the truth of the situation. Then they heard Maybe Dixon say he would walk into the forest and see if he could find Bob and Mark.

"All right, go ahead," answered Si. "I'll wait right here for you."

Dixon strolled off and was soon lost to view. Si, left to himself, leaned up against a convenient tree. His eyes closed, and soon he was in the land of dreams.

As soon as Si was asleep Sag Ruff walked into the opening.

"We'll fix this crowd, Soapy," said he to his tool. "A wagon and a mule won't go bad for us, eh?"

"Good enough, Sag. But the outfit is known on this route."

"Yes, but we can take the Salt Lake route. I've heard it was about as good as this one," added the gambler.

"Just as you say. But I don't want to get shot down."

"Do you want to hoof it all the way to California?" asked Sag Ruff, sharply.

"No."

"Then don't talk."

"What about the boy?"

"He seems to be sound asleep. Leave him where he is."

With as little noise as possible they walked over to where Darling was tethered and freed the mule. Then they led the animal to the wagon and hitched him up. They worked swiftly, afraid every instant that Maybe Dixon or Mark or Bob might appear.

"Now then, off we go!" cried Sag Ruff, and started Darling. The mule made the move somewhat against his will, but he did not know the true situation and finally settled down to a steady pull, across the ford and then along a side trail, about which the gambler and his tool had heard only the day previous. This led through another patch of timber, and soon men and outfit were lost to view from the fording place.

All unconscious of what was happening, Si slept the sleep of the just for nearly two hours. He awoke only when he felt Maybe Dixon's hand on his shoulder.

"Si! wake up here!" cried Dixon, shaking him. "Where's the turnout, lad?"

"The turnout?" repeated the farm boy, rubbing his eyes in bewilderment. "Why, it's—— It's gone!"

"Exactly. Don't you know where to?"

"Why, I—I didn't know it was gone!" Si

leaped to his feet and now he was wide-awake.

"Maybe Dixon, is this some joke?" he demanded.

"Maybe it is, lad, but if so, it's none of my doings."

"Haven't you seen the wagon and Darling?"

"Not since I went away. When did you go to sleep?"

"I—er—I think I dropped off right after you went off."

"That's about two hours ago."

"As long as that! Gracious, I thought I only had a short nap! Did you find Mark and Bob?"

"No, couldn't get the least trace of 'em. But about the turnout? Haven't you any idea at all where it is?"

"No." Si looked around. "Somebody has been here, hitched up the mule, and drove away with our belongings," he continued, bitterly. "And I am to blame! What will Bob and Mark say?"

"It might have happened to any of us, lad. But we must get on the trail of the thieves."

"Yes! yes! Do you think they followed the regular trail?"

"Perhaps so—but if they did, they'll soon run into Socket and some of our other friends. They may have been cute enough to take to some side

trail. There are plenty of them around here. Everybody don't go over the mountains by exactly the same trail."

The two looked around carefully and saw the tracks of several feet in the soft soil. They wondered who the thieves could be, but could reach no satisfying conclusion.

Poor Si was utterly discouraged. He had heard before of outfits being stolen along the trail, and knew that some men guarded their horses night and day. At one place they had heard of a man being hung up on a tree for stealing a horse. There were no prisons and no courts, and the pioneers had to take the law into their own hands for self-protection. Any serious crime was punishable by death.

Neither Si nor Maybe Dixon knew exactly what to do, but at last they hit on a plan they thought was best. They put up a stick and in a slit at the top left a note for Bob and Mark, explaining the situation so far as they knew it. They added that they were going to hunt for the thief and would be back at that spot sooner or later.

This accomplished, they set off along the river bank and then into the timber. The trail was fairly smooth and they made good progress over the somewhat spongy soil. They did not know

whether they were right or wrong, but, as Si declared, it was "better to do something than to do nothing."

"This is the way things in life change," said Maybe Dixon, as they trudged along. "One day everything is bright an' fair, an' the next you're in a fust-class mix-up an' don't know how to turn yourself."

"If we don't get that outfit back, I don't know what we are going to do."

"Oh, we must git it back, lad. It won't do at all to lose it. I wish I knew the skunk who dared to take it!"

"Is your rifle loaded?"

"Sure, and it's ready to fire, too. I won't parley with sech a miserable thief."

"You would shoot him down?"

"As dead as a door nail—if I git the chance," added Maybe Dixon, firmly.

They passed a turn in the river, and then came out into something of a clearing. As they did this they caught sight of something far ahead, just entering another stretch of the woodland.

"What was that?" questioned Maybe Dixon, excitedly.

"It looked to me like our wagon, but I ain't sure," answered Si, with equal excitement. "I hope it is ours!"

"Hump along a bit faster, lad."

They did "hump" along, almost on a run. The trail was now hard and smooth, so that anybody driving a horse or mule could cover the ground with ease. They came to another clearing and once more caught a brief glimpse of something in front.

"I believe it is our wagon!" cried Si. "Anyway the back certainly looks very much like it."

"I think I saw a man on the ground, walking," added Maybe Dixon.

"Then there must be two thieves!"

"There may be more."

"What can we do if there are a whole crowd of them?" questioned Si, in sudden dismay. "We can't fight half a dozen with only one rifle and this old hoss pistol of mine."

"If they are too many for us we can follow them on the sly until we come to some place where we can git help, Si. Anybody who is honest will help us to run 'em down."

They went on as before, and in quarter of an hour came to another clearing, long and narrow, and not far from the bank of the stream, which seemed to wind in and out through the forest. Here they got a fairly good look at the turnout ahead of them.

"It is our outfit, sure enough!" declared Si.

"Yes, and the driver is licking old Darling hard," added Maybe Dixon. "They are bound to git away with the turnout if they can!"

CHAPTER XV

A SNAKE, A DEER, AND A SURPRISE

LET us now return to Bob and Mark at the time they found themselves lost in the mighty forest.

For several minutes the two youths stared around them in great perplexity, not knowing what to do next.

"This is a fine state of affairs, I must say," groaned Mark, presently. "Bob, we are worse than a couple of children."

"It's like bein' at sea without a compass," declared the former sailor lad. "We don't know in what direction to steer to make port."

"Well, one thing is certain, we can't stay here all day."

"We can if we have to."

"Don't you want to make a move?"

"I don't want to get tangled up any worse than I am now. I've got an idea," went on Bob, suddenly.

"What is it?"

"I'll climb one of the big trees around here and take a look as to how the land lays."

"Good enough! We were a pair of geese not to think of that before. I can go up with you."

But when it came to climbing, Mark decided to let the former sailor boy go it alone. He gave Bob a boost and up went the lad in true nautical style with hardly an effort.

"You can climb, that's sure," said Mark, admiringly.

"Always could," answered Bob from above. "Went clear up to the masthead before I was on my first ship a week."

"Didn't it make you dizzy?"

"Not in the least."

Mark remained at the foot of the tree, while Bob mounted higher and higher. Presently the former sailor lad called down that he had reached the top and could get a good look on all sides.

"I can see the river, as plain as day," he said. "It is about a mile from here. And I can see some turnouts further off."

"Good enough! Let us walk to the river, and then follow it until we reach the fording place."

Bob came down to the ground again, and they set off through the forest once more, taking great care that they should not become turned around again.

"I have heard of people being lost in the woods, and I don't wonder at it now," observed Mark. "It is the easiest thing in the world to go astray."

As they journeyed along they stirred up some small game, but before they could take aim the game got out of sight.

"That shows we are not used to gunning," said Bob, with a laugh. "A regular hunter is on the watch all the time."

They were still some distance from the river when Bob, who was slightly in advance, let out a yell which would have done credit to a wild Indian:

"A snake!"

"Where?" queried his companion.

"Right ahead of us."

"I see him now," answered Mark, as the head of the reptile was lifted. "Gosh, what a big one!"

"I'd like to know if he is a rattler," said Bob, as he backed away.

"Perhaps so, Bob. They say that rattlesnakes are to be found in all parts of this country."

The two boys started to make a detour. As they did this Mark gave a yell even louder than that uttered by his chum:

"Another snake!"

"Three of them!" roared Bob. "Mark, we've gotten into a regular nest of them!"

"Let us get out!"

The two lads lost no time in retreating. Most of the snakes remained where they were, but one big fellow glided after them, hissing viciously.

"Look out, he's after us, Bob!"

"Ain't a rattler, I reckon—leastwise, I don't hear any rattle."

"But he is bad enough!"

"I'll shoot him!" cried the former sailor boy, and raising his shotgun, he blazed away at the reptile, hitting it in the neck. At once the snake whipped around madly, and the long, rubbery body wound itself around poor Bob's legs.

"Help me! Save me!" screamed Bob, and tried to kick himself loose, but without avail.

Mark saw his chum's extreme peril, and rushed forward with his own gun. He pressed the barrel between Bob's legs and up against the body of the reptile, and pulled the trigger.

The shot at such close range had its full effect and the body of the snake was literally ripped to pieces by the heavy shot. The reptile fell to the ground with a quiver, and Bob lost no time in starting to run again.

"I hope I didn't hurt you, Bob?"

"I—I think one leg is singed, but that don't

count, Mark! Ugh! what a horrible creature it was!"

"Right you are."

"Are the others following?"

Both looked back but could see nothing of the other reptiles. Soon they had given that locality a wide berth, and then both breathed a bit easier.

"We must have our eyes open after this," said Mark, as he and his chum reloaded their shot-guns. "If that snake was poisonous you had a pretty close shave."

"I guess I had a pretty close shave as it was," answered Bob, with a shudder. "Of all the horrible things in this world, I think a snake is the worst!"

"I think so myself."

They kept on, and at last reached the river, which at this point was broad and shallow, with a rocky bottom. They stopped for a drink and then gazed up and down the watercourse in perplexity.

"Is the ford up or down?" asked Mark.

"Just what I was trying to decide, Mark. I rather think it is down."

"So do I."

"Here is something of a deer trail along the stream. We can follow that until——"

Bob stopped short and leaped behind a bush, motioning for his chum to do the same.

"What did you see?" whispered Mark.

"A deer! There he is!"

"Shoot him, Bob!"

Bang! went the shotgun of the former sailor boy and the deer leaped high in the air. Then it sprang into the river and started to swim across.

"He will get away!"

"I will give him a shot!" cried Mark, and taking hasty aim he fired. The shot went true, and the deer turned over on its side and began to float down the river.

"We'll lose him after all!" cried Mark, in disappointment.

"Not much," said Bob, and ran along the bank, throwing off some of his clothing as he did so. Then the deer caught on a snag, and after some trouble the former sailor boy brought the carcass ashore.

"There's prime meat for all hands!" said he, surveying the game with much pride. "Mark, we shan't go back so empty-handed after all!"

"I am glad of it," was the reply.

They had just pulled the deer up on the bank and were wondering how they could best carry the game, when they heard a noise beyond the river, as of a horse and wagon crashing through some

bushes. They looked in the direction and to their amazement saw their own wagon and Darling moving along, driven by Sag Ruff and a man who was a stranger.

"Bob! is it possible?" gasped Mark.

"It looks as if Sag Ruff had stolen our outfit!" ejaculated Bob. "Who is that with him?"

"I don't know—perhaps that fellow I heard spoken of, Soapy Gannon."

"I wonder how they got hold of the outfit?"

"I am sure I don't know, but I do know one thing——"

"We must get our outfit back."

"That's the talk."

"They are on the other side of the river?"

"We can wade or swim over."

By this time the mule and the wagon, along with Sag Ruff and Soapy Gannon, had disappeared behind some trees. The men were urging the mule on in every possible manner, beating him one minute and coaxing him the next.

"They have taken to this side trail on purpose," said Mark. "They are evidently afraid of meeting some of our friends."

It was decided to leave the deer and the rest of their game hanging in a tree by the riverside. Then they searched along the watercourse until they found a spot where fording was compara-

tively easy. Mark took off his shoes and stockings, rolled up his trousers, and waded in, and Bob followed.

"Now look to your shotgun," said Bob, when they were safe on the other side. "Those fellows may want to fight." And both loaded with care, and then put on their shoes and stockings again, and started after the stolen turnout.

It was no easy walk, and once they made a false turn on the trail, getting into a clump of nettles which scratched them and tore their clothing. But then they reached a level stretch and Mark set off on a run, with Bob at his heels.

"I see them!" cried Mark, a few minutes later. "There they go again, behind yonder trees."

They continued to run, and soon came up to the rear of the turnout. They found Sag Ruff walking on one side of the wagon and Soapy Gannon on the other.

"Stop!" cried Mark, and brought up his shotgun. "Stop, you rascals, or I'll fire!"

CHAPTER XVI

GETTING BACK THE OUTFIT

IF ever two men were taken aback they were Sag Ruff and Soapy Gannon. They had not expected to be followed so quickly and both were much disconcerted.

"Don't shoot me!" yelled Soapy Gannon, who, as intimated before, was a coward at heart.

"What do you want of me?" growled Sag Ruff, and his hand stole toward his pistol pocket.

"Up with your hands!" cried Bob, as he too raised his shotgun. "If there is any shooting to be done here, we'll do it," he added, with grim determination.

"Don't you shoot," answered Ruff, and his hand left the pocket and came up in the air, followed by the other. Soapy Gannon already had both hands elevated.

"What do you mean by stealing our outfit in this fashion?" demanded Mark, after an awkward pause.

"Who said we were stealing it?" asked Sag Ruff in return.

"We have eyes."

"We found this outfit on the trail and didn't know who it belonged to."

"That's it," added Soapy Gannon, quickly. "Not a soul was in sight around it."

"Do you expect us to believe that story?" burst out Bob, sarcastically. "If you do, you are mistaken."

"I might believe it from an honest man, but not such a rascal as you," added Mark. "Sag Ruff, you are a scoundrel of the first water!"

"What have you done to Si Williams and Maybe Dixon?" asked the former sailor lad.

"Don't know anything about them," growled Sag Ruff. His eyes shifted uneasily from one boy to the other. "See here, how long do you want us to keep our hands raised?" he went on.

"You'll keep them up for the present," answered Mark.

"If you don't something is going to go off," added Bob.

"You think you are a pretty smart boy, don't you?" sneered the gambler, turning to Mark.

"I believe in standing up for myself."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"That remains to be seen. I want you to tell us where our two friends are."

"If you don't, we'll make you prisoners and let the other emigrants know what you've been up to," put in Bob.

"We didn't steal the outfit," insisted Sag Ruff. "We found it on the trail, just as I said before."

"Where was Si Williams? We left him in charge."

"Didn't see a soul around the wagon or mule," put in Soapy Gannon.

There was another pause. To tell the truth, neither of the boys knew exactly what to do. To keep the gambler and his tool at bay was one thing; to make them close prisoners was quite another. In a tussle the rascals might get the better of the contest. Both Bob and Mark preferred to keep them at a distance.

"Turn around there," said Mark, at last, after whispering to his chum.

"What do you want of us now?" asked Ruff.

"I want you to march back the way you came, and keep up your hands."

"And if we won't do it?"

"There will be trouble, and you'll get the worst of it," answered Bob, and aimed his shotgun squarely at the gambler's head.

Muttering imprecations under his breath, Sag

Ruff turned around and Soapy Gannon did the same. Then Bob lowered his gun for the moment and took the reins of the mule. Darling and the wagon were turned around and faced in the direction from whence they had come.

"Now march!" cried Mark, who still had his shotgun leveled. "And no monkey work remember, or you'll get what you won't like."

The outfit was started up, and slowly they proceeded through the timber. The trail now led from the river and they passed some rough rocks.

"Here is where we get away!" cried Sag Ruff, in a low voice. "Break for it, Soapy—it's our only chance!"

He leaped for the rocks, and seeing this his tool did the same. As they passed out of sight Mark's shotgun went off, but the boy did not have the heart to shoot straight at them and the shot merely cut through the tree branches overhead.

"There they go!"

"Come back here!" roared Bob, dropping the reins and taking up his weapon.

"If you fire again, I'll fire!" answered Sag Ruff, and the next instant a bullet whistled so close to Mark's head that he dodged and fell up against the side of the mule. Then Bob fired, but the shot merely grazed the gambler's arm and Soapy Gannon's shoulder.

"Hullo there!" came suddenly from a distance, and a moment later Si and Maybe Dixon burst into view, running at their best speed.

"Hullo yourself!" shouted Mark. "You've come in the nick of time."

"Didn't we see Sag Ruff and another man here?" questioned Si.

"You did."

"Where are they now?"

"Run away."

"Are you shot?"

"No, but I think we had a narrow escape," answered Mark.

They listened and heard Sag Ruff and Soapy Gannon talking at a distance. Soon they heard a splash, as the two men plunged into the river, and then all became silent.

"They have run for it," said Bob. "And I must say I am glad of it." He was pale from excitement.

"It was all my fault," said Si, as soon as the crowd had calmed down a little. "I went to sleep when I had no business to," and then he told his story.

"We can be thankful we got the outfit back so quickly," said Maybe Dixon. "Had they gotten away for thirty or forty miles maybe we'd never have seen this mule an' wagon ag'in."

"After this we must be on our guard," said Mark.

"I know something to do," put in Bob. "Tie a small string to the wagon and run it to where we are sleeping. In the dark a thief won't see the string, and if he tries to pull away the wagon the string will pull somebody and wake him up." This, later on, was done, and worked very well.

As soon as the excitement was over, the whole party pushed along near to the spot where Bob and Mark had left their game. Then the deer and the prairie hens were placed in the wagon and they went back to the camp at the ford.

"I am hungry enough to eat anything!" declared Bob. "A bit of venison will taste prime."

The deer was skinned and cut up, and soon they had some fine steaks broiling over a blaze Si started. They took their time over the meal, and while eating discussed the situation from every possible point of view.

"We really ought to bring Sag Ruff and his accomplice to justice," said Mark. "But I hate to lose time trying to do it."

"We can't afford to lose no time—if we are going to git over the Rocky Mountains afore cold weather sets in," said Maybe Dixon. "We want to hustle right along."

"Just what I've been thinking," said Si. "I'd

hate most awfully to get caught in the mountains in freezing weather. Why, we'd be frozen stiff!"

"And maybe we'd lose our way," went on Maybe Dixon.

"All right then, let us hustle," answered Bob.

The hustling began the very next day, and continued uninterruptedly for over a week. They made excellent progress and were soon in the very heart of the mountains. It was cold and clear, and they saw some signs of snow, but it did not come.

The Sockets were traveling with them again. The boys had given them some of the venison and two prairie hens and in return Mrs. Socket made them some fresh bread and, on Sunday, a splendid loaf cake. She also cooked them a pot of good soup, which Si declared tasted more like "hum" than ever. The oldest Socket girl, named Mary, darned their stockings and also mended their underwear, which was a "real lift," as Maybe Dixon expressed it.

"I ain't no good with a thread an' needle an' never was," said the pioneer. "It takes me about an hour to git the thread in the needle, an' I never kin find the holes in a button when I want for to sew it on."

So far Darling had done exceedingly well and the boys agreed that a real prize had been gained

by Bob in purchasing the animal. But when they were almost in the very heart of the Rockies the plucky little mule went lame, why nobody could exactly tell.

"He's got a rock sore, that's wot," said Josiah Socket. "Comes from walkin' on the rocks. He ought to be turned out into pasture fer a spell, then he'd be all right."

"How you talk, Josiah Socket!" burst out his spouse. "Turn him out to pasture indeed! As if the pasturing was a-layin' around loose in these mountains an' the boys didn't have nuthin' else to do but to watch him while he got well. Can't you do something, so as they can go ahead with the critter somehow?"

"Couldn't we bind it up in soft cloth?" suggested Mark.

"Might try it," said Josiah Socket, and in the end a soft shoe, made of an old sponge and a bit of blanket, was tied on the lame foot, which was first greased thoroughly. This did some good, and poor Darling hobbled along in fairly good shape but at a reduced rate of speed.

Two days later the boys reached the end of the wagon trail on that particular route. The remains of wagons lay on all sides, showing that it had been necessary to abandon them.

"You might get through with your wagon,"

said one gold hunter, who had been across the mountains twice. "But it is more trouble than it is worth. Better make packs of yer outfit and cross on foot."

"Well, we won't lose much by leaving the wagon," said Bob. "It's about used up anyway." What he said was true. The rough traveling had caused the turnout to break down more than once and they had spent many hours in making it fit to use. A few more heavy jolts would cause it to fall to pieces.

CHAPTER XVII

AMONG THE INDIANS

THE day after they abandoned the wagon, and divided the outfit into packs, the young pioneers found themselves on something of a plateau among the Rockies. Each carried a stiff load on his shoulders, and what was left of the outfit was strapped to the back of the mule,—enough to make Darling move along slower than ever.

They had come over a broken trail, where they had often to leap from one rock to the next. More than once one or another of them had fallen, and Si had received a wrench of his left ankle that hurt him considerably.

"This ain't walking over no farm," grumbled Si, as he limped on. "I hope the trail don't get any worse."

"I am afraid it will be worse before we get through the pass," said Mark. "These are not called the Rocky Mountains for nothing."

"Boys, I saw some Indians just now!" cried

Maybe Dixon, who was in advance. "About a dozen of them, on ponies."

"Where?" cried the lads, in concert.

"Over yonder." Maybe Dixon pointed with his hand. "They are gone now—behind the spur of rocks."

The boys were curious to see the red men—having met so few on the trail, but when they reached the spur of rocks the Indians were nowhere in sight.

That noon they had to care for Darling's foot again and this took some time. In the meanwhile the Sockets went on, leaving them alone. They were just about to proceed when three Indians rode up. They were a dirty set, with faces sadly in need of washing, and long, talon-like finger nails.

"Ugh! Give Indian tobacco," said one.

"Give Indian sugar," said a second.

"Blue Water cold—give um blanket," came from the third.

"I haven't any tobacco to spare," said Maybe Dixon, who carried only a small pouchful.

"The sugar is about gone," added Si.

"We need our blankets," put in Mark. "Where are your own?"

The Indians looked disappointed and their painted faces grew dark.

"No give poor Indians nothing?" asked the fellow who had first spoken.

"We haven't anything to spare," said Bob. He and the others had already learned that the more the red men got from the white travelers the more they wanted.

The Indians continued to beg for something and at last were given some beans and a small bit of venison. Then they turned their ponies and galloped away over the rocks.

"We are well rid of them," said Mark, with a sigh of relief.

"That is, if they don't come back," returned Maybe Dixon, dryly.

"Do you think they will?" questioned Si. "I shan't give them a thing more."

"I didn't like their looks," remarked Bob. "They seemed a treacherous lot."

They passed on until nightfall. It was very cold and they were glad enough to bring in such firewood as was handy and start a big blaze. Around this they huddled and cooked their supper.

"We'll be up against winter for certain putty soon now," said Maybe Dixon. "Maybe it will catch us afore we know it."

"Oh, I trust we get out of the mountains before it comes," answered Mark.

All were utterly worn out from the day's traveling and glad enough to lie down to rest. They found a little patch of brushwood growing among the rocks, and there proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted. It was no soft bed, but it was the best to be found, and nobody thought of grumbling.

Mark had been asleep about two hours when he awoke with a sudden start. He had been dreaming of home and of his step-father, and imagined Jadell Powers had him by the foot and was dragging him across the floor of the dingy law office.

He opened his eyes widely and stared around him. All was dark, but in the gloom he discerned several forms moving around. The forms were those of Indians, and the red men were going through the packs which lay beside the mule. To the packs and the mule was attached a light string and the other end of the string was tied to Mark's foot.

"Indians!" he burst out. "Hi! wake up! The Indians are here!"

His cry was so shrill that it awoke everybody in the camp, and all leaped to their feet.

"What's up?"

"Where are the Indians?"

"There they go!" answered Mark. "They were at our packs."

"The old Nick, you say!" burst out Maybe Dixon. He reached for his rifle, which rested under him. "I'll give 'em something to remember us by!"

But before he could take aim the Indians had vanished in the gloom of the night. They heard the footsteps resounding on the rocks, then heard the red men mount their ponies and gallop away.

"They are gone," said Bob. "I say, I don't like this at all!"

"Nor I," came from Si. He gave a shiver. "They might have murdered every one of us while we slept!"

"That is so," said Mark.

"How did you happen to spot them?"

"They must have pulled on the string which was fastened to my foot. I've used the string ever since Sag Ruff ran off with the outfit."

The fire was stirred up and they took a good look around that vicinity. But the Indians were gone, nor did they return that night.

"I suppose it would be best for somebody to remain on guard every night after this," said Mark, after the search had come to an end. "We'd be in a pretty pickle if we lost our outfit."

"We'd starve to death," said Si. "Especially if they happened to steal our guns, too."

"Well, we can divide up each night and each take his turn at watching," said Bob; and so it was arranged.

The next day they overtook the Sockets, who had had a small breakdown. They, too, had met the Indians and had given them a few things.

"I was afraid they'd steal some of the children if we didn't give them something," said Mrs. Socket. "They looked at the girls so suspiciously."

"If they stole me, I'd die, I know I should!" declared Mary Socket. She was a tall, thin girl, but rather good-looking, and with a head of heavy brown hair.

The whole party proceeded together the next day, and that night each of the men and boys took his turn at staying on guard.

"Two hours on duty and eight off isn't so bad," said Mark. "We can stand that easily enough."

"Eight hours of sleep is enough for anybody," returned Bob.

"I like to rest my feet as much as I like to sleep," said Si. The constant walking over the rough rocks hurt his feet not a little. Mark did not mind it so much, being used to the hard city pavements.

The snowstorm that had been promised started in the next day about noon. There was a gentle

breeze at the time, blowing from the northward. The snow was not very thick, so they continued to go on until nightfall, when they reached the beginning of the pass proper, at an altitude many hundreds of feet above the level of the sea.

"I wish we were through the pass," said Mark. "I shan't mind the snow so much when we are coming down from the mountains."

"Even then it will be bad enough," said Maybe Dixon. "I'd rather be in camp at the foot of the mountains when real winter hits us."

During the night the storm cleared away, much to their satisfaction. The fall of snow was only a few inches deep and this did not interfere very materially with their progress, although it made the trail rather slippery and treacherous in places.

"Want to be careful where you walk," said Josiah Socket, who was in advance with Maybe Dixon. "It won't pay to git a tumble on sech rocks as these."

Bob and Mark were alongside of the mule. Darling had recovered somewhat from his lameness and was doing remarkably well, much to their satisfaction.

"What's the matter?" called back Bob to Si, who was in the rear.

"Foot's sore again," was the doleful answer.

"Can we do anything for you, Si?" asked Mark, kindly.

"Nary a thing that I know on," grumbled the former farm lad. "I reckon I've got to grin and bear it." And he shut his teeth hard.

"It's a pity Darling is so loaded up. Otherwise you might ride on his back," said Bob.

"And have him pitch me over his head on the rocks? No, thank you. I'll keep on walking and get there somehow," said Si.

The way kept growing worse constantly, until they had to make certain of one step before they ventured the next.

"Thank goodness it isn't snowing," said Mrs. Socket. "If it was, I don't know what we would do."

"They tell me the pass is better a bit further on," said Maybe Dixon. "We'll have just a little more climbing to do, and then the worst of it will be over."

"Well, the journey can't come to an end any too soon for me," said the woman. "Land sakes alive! if I had known what we were to go through with, I'd never 'a' started in the wide world."

"We want to make the most of the clear weather," said Bob. "Unless I miss my guess, it is going to snow again before very long."

"Right you are," answered Josiah Socket.
"The hull air is full o' snow."

Half a mile more was covered, and Bob and Mark were still by the side of the mule, when the latter suddenly looked back.

"Where is Si?" he cried.

"Si? Isn't he here?" came from Mark.

"I don't see him."

"Neither do I!"

"What's the matter, boys?" called out Maybe Dixon, turning back.

"We can't see Si," answered the former sailor lad.

"Can't see him? Wasn't he with you?"

"Yes, but he dropped behind, to fix his shoe."

They began to call for the former farm lad, but without avail. Si was neither in sight nor hearing.

"Something has happened to him," groaned Mark. "Perhaps he has fallen over some steep rocks and been killed!"

CHAPTER XVIII

SI TAKES A TUMBLE

As has been said, Si had stopped to fix his shoe, which now hurt him more than it had for some time.

As he was bending over, the wind took off his cap and blew it across the trail. The headcovering lodged in some brushwood growing at the side of a steep incline.

"Drat the luck!" murmured the former farm boy, and having adjusted the shoe once more, he started to regain the cap.

This was not so easy as it looked, and before Si knew it, he was slipping down the incline. He clutched at the brushwood, but it came out by the roots, and over and over he rolled, bringing up at last against a mass of dead leaves and brush and in almost total darkness.

The fall had taken the wind out of the youth and it was several minutes before he felt able to stand up and look around him. He had bumped

his forehead and likewise one elbow, but, fortunately, none of the hurts was serious.

"Gosh! If this don't beat all creation!" he gasped, peering around. "I must have come a mile a minit down that slide! Wonder how I am ever to get up again?"

The question was not an easy one to answer. In coming down he had rounded several curves, so that he could not get a view of the point from which he had started. The bottom of the pocket—for it was nothing more—was not over ten feet wide and a hundred or more feet in length. He calculated, after he had gotten his wits together, that the top was at least two or three hundred feet above him.

"Suppose I can be thankful I wasn't killed," he murmured, as he gazed up the twisting incline. "Beats all how I came down. Wonder if anybody in the crowd saw me?"

He waited for a few minutes, and then, having regained his breath, set up a shout. No answer came back, and he shouted several times in succession.

"They must have gone on," he mused. "If so, I'll have to do what I can to get out without their help."

He walked from one end of the pocket to the other twice, examining the incline from every

possible point of view. Presently he discovered one place where there were numerous cracks in the rocks, and he started to crawl up, slowly and cautiously, digging his fingers into the cracks as firmly as possible.

Si has half-way to the top of the opening when something happened that scared him not a little. From one of the cracks just over his head there darted some small animal—what he could not tell. It made for the top of the incline, but in its haste lost its footing and rolled up against the boy's head. Then, as Si tried to knock it away, it went leaping on, while the poor boy, having lost his hold, rolled and slid once more to the bottom of the pocket.

"Wonder what it was," thought the boy, as he picked himself up ruefully. "Glad it didn't bite me."

He wished he knew if there were more of the animals at hand, but as none appeared, he started up the incline as before, resolved to keep his grip no matter what happened.

"Hullo, Si!" came suddenly in a hearty voice from above.

"Mark, is that you?" he answered, joyfully.

"Yes. Where are you?"

"Tumbled down this hole."

"Are you hurt?"

"I reckon not. But I am pretty well shook up."

"Can you crawl up?"

"I am trying to do it, but it is a tough job."

"Wait, I'll get a rope," answered Mark, and ran off.

The others were all on the hunt, but Mark soon called them together. A long rope was taken from one of the mule packs and one end was allowed to slide down the incline. It came close to the spot where Si was clinging to the rocks.

"Got it?" sang out Bob.

"Not yet. Can't you let it down a few feet more?"

"Not very well."

"Then leave it as it is and I'll climb for it."

It was no easy task to reach the end of the rope, and twice poor Si thought that he would roll down into the pocket once more. But at last he had a firm hold of the lower end and he shouted for his friends to haul away, which they did, soon bringing him to the surface.

"I am glad to be on top again," said he, as he came out into the daylight.

"Be thankful you didn't break your neck," was Josiah Socket's comment.

"I am thankful."

"After this we'll have to be more than careful of where we walk," observed Mark, with a serious shake of his head. "There are some fearful pitfalls along this route."

"Well, I just guess!" cried Maybe Dixon. "Why, I've heard o' some gulches four an' five hundred feet deep! Reckon nobuddy wants to fall into sech a hole as that, eh?"

With the promise of another fall of snow in the air, the pioneers did not delay long, and soon the journey through the mighty mountain pass was resumed. They had to go upward for several hours, but before nightfall found themselves on the downward trail.

"Hurrah! we have passed the highest point!" cried Mark.

"And now downward we go to the Land of Gold!" exclaimed Bob with equal enthusiasm.

The thought that the upward climb was at an end at last cheered everybody in the party. They looked ahead eagerly, but the gloom of night was at hand and they could see little.

"If it was real clear maybe we could see some of them gold camps," said Maybe Dixon, in disappointed tones.

"Do you think we are close enough?" asked Si.

"It ain't that, lad. In a good clear air one can see for a long distance over these mountains."

"Then we've got lots of traveling to do yet?"

"Yes,—unless somebody has discovered gold along this trail. Gold may be in one place as well as another."

That night they went into camp close to the edge of a mighty cliff. Firewood was as scarce as "hen's teeth," as Si said, and they had to make the most of a tiny blaze just big enough to cook supper. They ate their food piping hot, which warmed them some. Then they got out all of their blankets.

"We are in for a night of it," said Mark, as he looked at the sky.

"Snow?" queried Bob, laconically.

"Yes, and a lot of it."

"I believe you. Too bad! when we are so near the end of the journey!"

"Well, as it can't be helped, we'll have to make the best of it."

It was decided that the entire party, including the Sockets, should camp together, and the horses and the mule were tied up close by. Darling was so tired he soon dropped down and fell asleep and the other steeds speedily followed.

Mark had the first watch and Bob and Si followed. Then Maybe Dixon took his turn. By this time it was snowing steadily.

"In for it sure," said Dixon to Josiah Socket,

who relieved him. "I'm afraid we won't do much travelin' to-morrow."

On account of the fall of snow it was not very cold, so the party slept fairly well even without a campfire. Mark was the first person to stir of his own party.

"Well, we are snowed in surely!" he cried, as he gazed around.

On all sides was a spread of dazzling white, and the snow was still coming down steadily. The pass behind them was totally blotted out, and they could see next to nothing ahead.

"The wust yet!" groaned Josiah Socket. "I calkerlated to be well sheltered by the time the snow was a-flyin'. What are we going to do?"

"I know what I am in favor of," said Mark, decidedly.

"What?"

"I'm in favor of getting down from this mountain somehow, to where we can strike better shelter and plenty of firewood, and water. We can't stay here all winter."

Mark's opinion was the opinion of all. They would wait for the snow to stop and then go on.

It was not until two o'clock in the afternoon that the fall ceased. But then the sun came out as if by magic, and on they went as rapidly as the

animals with their burdens could travel. Two old miners had come up and they assisted in keeping to the proper trail. All kept on until darkness made it unwise to go further.

"We are getting down," said Bob. "It is not as cold as it was." And what he said was true, the temperature was at least fifteen degrees above what they had experienced on the mountains the night before.

The next morning the sun came out again and as it rose they started onward once more, resolved to make as much progress as possible. They were aiming for the valley of the Yuba River, a tributary of the Feather River, where gold had but recently been located.

"I don't think we'll do any gold digging this winter," said Mark. "We'll have to wait until next spring."

"Well, we'll be on the ground, when the season opens," said Bob, consolingly.

"Ready to pick up nuggets, eh?" put in Si, with a broad grin.

"You're right, Si," laughed Mark. "And the bigger the better."

"Wouldn't mind finding one worth a million, would you?"

"Better make it two millions while you are at it," came from Bob.

"I am willing to take what comes," said Mark. "But I do hope we find some gold," he added, wistfully.

"We have certainly gone through enough to get it," added the former sailor lad.

CHAPTER XIX

A GLOOMY OUTLOOK

NEW YEAR'S day found the young pioneers located in the valley of the Yuba River, in a rude cabin which it had cost them a good deal of time and trouble to erect. They had come across the continent in safety, and now they were impatient for the winter to go away that they might start their hunt for gold dust and nuggets.

"Good-by to 1848!" sang out Mark. "May the year 1849 prove a fortunate one for all of us."

"Amen to that," came from Maybe Dixon, who sat by the rude fire-place, boiling a pot of coffee. They had very little coffee left and so had to boil it a good while, to get some strength out of the small quantity used at a time.

"I wouldn't mind it so much if we weren't so shy of provisions," said Bob. "But I can tell you what, boys, things are getting mighty low."

They all knew that without being told, yet the saying of it made the crowd look sober.

"Do you know what I am going to do?" said Maybe Dixon. "I'm going out to-morrow and see if I can't bring down game of some sort."

"Let me go with you!" exclaimed Si, eagerly.

"All right, Si, you can go,—with the shotgun. We ought to be able to scare up some rabbits if nothin' else."

Close at hand was another log cabin, occupied by the Sockets. They too were short of provisions and had been over several times to borrow things to eat.

"I'll willingly pay for them," said Josiah Socket, who had brought considerable money with him. "I'd give a good bit to have a general store handy."

"So would we, even though we haven't much money," said Mark.

They let the Sockets have what they thought they could possibly spare. But it was very little, and everybody at both cabins was put, for the time being, on half rations or less. At this the smaller Socket children set up a protest, which went straight to their mother's heart.

"Oh, Josiah, we must do something," sighed Mrs. Socket. "Isn't there any store at all around here?"

Her husband said no, but two days later a miner came along who said some provisions could

be had at a camp known as the Four Monkeys. The camp was forty miles away. Prices were frightfully high, but the goods were to be had, if a man wanted to pay for them.

After talking the matter over with Maybe Dixon and the boys, it was decided that Socket and Mark should pay a visit to Four Monkeys, taking Socket's two horses for the journey. They were given minute directions regarding the trail to follow, and started away at the same time that Maybe Dixon and Si went on a hunt.

"How long will you be gone, Josiah?" asked his wife.

"Not more than four days—unless the trail is very bad," answered the husband.

As soon as Mark and Socket had departed for the distant camp, Maybe Dixon and Si went out on the hunt. This left Bob, Mrs. Socket, and the children in the two cabins alone.

Maybe Dixon and Si were full of expectations, but after tramping around for several hours without seeing game of any kind the face of each took on a gloomy look.

"We ain't doing much, that's sure," grumbled the man, as they paused near a series of rocks to rest. "Not a smell o' even a rabbit. It does beat all, don't it?"

"I am not going to give up yet," answered Si.

"I am not going back until I get something, even if it is only one little snowbird," and he shook his head decidedly.

They had gone through a small patch of timber from north to south and now crossed it in the opposite direction. They were just rounding a series of rocks when Si let out a yell:

"A bear!"

"Where?" yelled the man in return.

"There! He is gone now! Say, he was a whopper!"

"Si, we must get him!"

"All right, but if we don't watch out he'll chew us up," added the former farm lad. "A big bear isn't to be fooled with."

"I know it, but we must try and get the meat. Is your gun all right?"

"Yes."

"So is my rifle. Come on after him."

They were soon at the spot where the bear had been. The trail was plainly to be seen and led over the rocks, where the wind had blown away the most of the snow.

A good quarter of a mile had been covered when they heard a strange grunt ahead of them. The next instant the bear came into full view. He was up on his hind legs and evidently ready for a fight.

Maybe Dixon did not stop to think twice but blazed away, hitting the animal in the forequarter. Then Si let drive, and the shot sprinkled the bear's face, putting out one eye.

Half blinded and suffering intense pain, the bear turned as if to flee. But a moment later he swung around again and came after Si full speed.

"Out o' the way!" roared Maybe Dixon. "Out o' the way, or he'll kill you sure!"

Si was getting out of the way with all speed. He darted behind some trees, made a half circle, and then leaped to the top of the very rocks from which the bear had come when he first put in his appearance.

In the meantime the man was reloading with all possible speed and soon had his rifle ready for a second shot. Feeling the necessity for doing his best, he ran in close to the bear and blazed away at bruin's head. But just as the rifle was discharged the bear dropped down, and the bullet flew over its mark.

"You've missed him!" screamed Si, and then retreated still further, until a low-branched tree barred his progress. Without stopping to think twice, the former farm lad leaped into the nearest branches and mounted out of reach of the bear.

Disappointed, the animal slipped around the tree and finally started to come up the somewhat sloping trunk. In his excitement, the boy had dropped his shotgun on the ground, so he had nothing with which to defend himself.

"Shoot him, can't you?" he yelled to the man. "Hurry up, quick!"

Maybe Dixon was reloading with all speed. But he was nervous and consequently took longer than if he had been cool. Before he was ready to fire again the bear was following Si to a still higher branch of the tree.

The former farm lad was badly frightened and with good reason. The loss of one eye had made the bear furious and his one purpose now appeared to be to get hold of the youth and chew him up.

"Can't you fire?" sang out the boy, when near the top of the tree.

"I don't want to hit you," answered Maybe Dixon. "Tell you what, can't you drop to the ground and leave the bear up there?"

"I'll try it," answered Si, and a moment later his body came crashing through the branches. As he passed the bear he hit the animal on the rump. This caused the bear to swing around and lose his balance, and boy and beast came down together on the ground.

Maybe Dixon was close at hand, and before the bear could do more than roll over he let drive, this time putting a bullet into the animal's vitals. The bear got up, staggered toward Si, who quickly darted out of reach, and then tumbled in a heap and began to quiver.

"I guess you hit him that time," panted Si. His face was as white as the snow.

"I guess I did," answered Maybe Dixon. "But don't go near him. He may be shamming."

After a few minutes the bear lay still and they approached with caution, and Maybe Dixon plunged a hunting knife into the animal's throat. Then they were certain the battle royal was at an end.

"Gracious me, but that was a fight!" ejaculated Si, who was still trembling. "I thought sure the bear was going to eat me up!"

"We were lucky that he didn't hug one or tunder to death, Si. He a putty big an' powerful critter, he is!"

"We'll have a lot of meat now."

"So we will, an' I am glad of it. I am tired of livin' on half rations."

"So am I. Fresh meat is just what we need—to help along with the beans and flour."

It was no easy task to get the big carcass to the cabin. They cut a tree branch for a drag and

rolled the dead bear upon it. Then both took hold of the drag and started over the snow, taking to the smoothest trail they could find.

"We'll have the juiciest kind of a bear steak for dinner to-day," said Si. "It's too bad Mr. Socket and Mark won't be here to help enjoy it."

"That is so, lad. Well, they can have all they want when they come back. In such cold weather as this the meat will keep a long time."

With such a heavy load they had to rest several times on the way. As they made the journey to the cabin they kept their eyes open for other game, but nothing but a squirrel came to view and they did not shoot at this.

"Let the little chap go," said Si. "We've got something more substantial, even if it isn't quite so delicate."

"Right you are, Si; a squirrel ain't more'n quarter of a meal anyhow. We'll save our ammunition."

Bob was on the lookout for them, and so were Mrs. Socket and her children. All ran out into the open with exclamations of delight.

"A bear!"

"What a fine, big fellow!"

"Now we will have all the meat we want for a while!"

"Mrs. Socket, in honor of the occasion, I move

you cook us one good square all-around meal," said Maybe Dixon.

"I will do it, Mr. Dixon," said the lady of the camp promptly. "And I am glad to have the chance," she added.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE TRADING CAMP

JOSIAH SOCKET and Mark found it no easy matter to make their way to the trading camp known as Four Monkeys. The distance was only forty miles, but the trail was rough and uncertain, and more than once they were afraid they had taken to a false road.

"If we have gone astray goodness only knows where we will fetch up," groaned Josiah Socket, at the end of the first day's journey. "We'll be hopelessly lost, I reckon."

"I think we are on the right trail or close to it," answered Mark, hopefully.

They encamped that night under some thick cedar trees, building a fire close by, where they cooked such a meal as their rations afforded. They had seen no game but wild ducks that had been too far off to bring down.

At daybreak they were astir again and after a hasty breakfast mounted and pressed on as before.

"We covered all of twenty miles yesterday," said Mark. "And that being so, we ought to reach the trading camp by night."

"Let us keep on till we do," answered Josiah Socket, who had not relished the camp in the open in such wintry weather.

They pushed the horses as much as possible, merely stopping for a short rest and a meal at noon. They soon reached a stream the old miner had mentioned, and just at sundown saw smoke at a distance, coming from the chimney of a log cabin to which was attached a long shack or shed.

"Hurrah! here is the place we are looking for!" cried Mark. "Here we are at Four Monkeys at last."

There were seven cabins in the camp, all located near the river, which was frozen over completely and ridged with snowdrifts. Four of the cabins showed signs of life, the others appeared to be deserted.

"Those cabins must be for the Four Monkeys," said Mark.

Their coming to the camp was not noticed until they rode up to the door of the largest place. Then the barrier was thrown open, and a burly man with a round face and a cheery smile put in an appearance.

"Hullo, strangers!" he sang out. "Where did you drift from?"

"From forty miles up the Yuba," answered Josiah Socket. "Heard tell as how you had a tradin' place here."

"So I have, but I ain't got very much left to trade with."

"But you have something, haven't you?" asked Mark, anxiously.

"Oh, yes,—some flour and beans and bacon, picks, shovels, pans, and such stuff," answered the man. "Take your hosses around to the shed, if you will," he added, and pointed to a door beyond the cabin proper.

They followed his advice, finding three animals already in the building. In the shed was a sign:

Horse feed inside.

50 cents a quart.

Don't let the animal go hungry.

"Gosh, but hoss feed comes high here," murmured Josiah Socket. "Howsomever, the hosses shall have all they want this trip. They deserve it, they do!"

There was a door from the shed to the main building, and they passed through this, to find themselves in a well-heated apartment, piled high

with stores of various kinds. Around a pot stove sat several men, smoking and drinking. All nodded pleasantly to the newcomers and made room for them, that they might warm up.

They soon learned that the proprietor of the place was Abram Monkey and that he had with him three younger brothers,—which state of affairs had given the trading camp the name of the Four Monkeys. The Monkeys were from Chicago and had come over the Rockies with a heavy pack train during the past summer. Two of the brothers were running the trading place while the other two had thrown in their fortunes with the miners and prospectors.

“Come over with your whole family, eh?” said Abram Monkey to Josiah Socket. “Well, you’re a pretty brave fellow, I must say. Hope your wife likes it.”

“She will, after she gets acquainted,” was the answer. “But there ain’t none of us likes the winter.”

To be sociable, he treated all of the men present, and then began to do his trading. All of the commodities to be had were high in price, flour being fifty dollars per barrel, beans two dollars a quart, bacon and pork a dollar a pound, and even tallow candles fetching “two bits,” twenty-five cents, each. But little in the way of clothing was

to be had, flannel shirts bringing five dollars apiece and army blankets ten dollars each. The only vegetables were turnips and cabbages, the former worth a dollar a peck and the latter fifty cents a head, and rather wormy at that.

"I am afraid my money won't go far," said Mark. He had twelve dollars belonging to Bob, Si, and himself, and ten dollars that had come from Maybe Dixon.

"Never mind, I'll stake you for fifty dollars," answered Josiah Socket. "You can pay me back when you make your first haul o' nuggets."

"Thank you," answered Mark, gratefully. "You are very kind, Mr. Socket."

"I want to be neighborly, lad. Besides, you boys and Dixon have done us many favors an' I ain't forgetting them."

Josiah Dixon and Mark spent the best part of the evening in picking out the things they wished to take along, including some coffee, tea, sugar and spices, besides the things mentioned above. They also got some cough mixture for one of the Socket children and a bottle of liquor for medicinal purposes. As luck would have it, not one of the men in camp at Four Monkeys was a hard drinker, for which both Mark and Josiah Socket were thankful.

"Can't see how some fellers can spend all they

have on liquor," said Socket. "I like an occasional glass, but that's all."

"And I don't want any," answered Mark.

"Well, I reckon as how you're jest as well off without it."

But although Josiah Socket did not care for liquor, he loved his tobacco and took along two plugs of "tar heel," one for himself and one for Maybe Dixon, the plugs of a pound each costing two dollars.

They spent the night in one of the cabins, that belonging to Abram Monkey's youngest brother, and at sunrise were all ready for the trip back to their own camp.

"Wish you luck!" cried Abram Monkey, as they went away. "If you want any more supplies, call again."

"We will," said Josiah Socket.

"I've got to find some gold first," answered Mark, with a grin.

"Well, you'll find it, my boy, as soon as the season opens. This land is full of dust and nuggets."

They took to the trail by which they had come. There had been a light fall of snow during the night, covering their former tracks, but they remembered many of the landmarks, so had no fear of going astray.

"How much did you spend, lad?" asked Josiah Socket, as they rode along.

"Sixty-four dollars."

"And I spent an even hundred. Putty expensive living, eh? But we'll be a heap sight more comfortable for the rest of the cold weather than we have been."

"That is true—even if we didn't invest in luxuries," said Mark.

"We can buy luxuries after we've gathered a little heap o' nuggets."

"Mr. Socket, what do you really think of our prospects?"

"Can't tell, Mark. One day I think we'll get rich, an' the next I think it was a fool move for me to pull up stakes an' come away out here."

"I can hardly wait for spring to come—I am so anxious to try my luck."

"I am the same way. But we have got to be patient."

"Do you think we had better stay where we are, when the season opens?"

"That will depend on the reports we hear. If we hear of a rich find in some nearby locality I think we had best go there."

About noon it began to snow again, and then they hurried on faster than before, fearful of being storm-bound on the trail. They were on

foot, the horses being packed with the supplies. The walking was not easy and both wished themselves once more at the cabins.

As they made a turn, about the middle of the afternoon, Mark chanced to glance back, and gave a sudden cry of surprise:

"Indians!"

"What's that?" asked Josiah Socket, quickly.

"I just caught sight of three Indians. They are out of sight now."

"On hossback?"

"No, on foot. As soon as they saw me look back they skipped behind the trees."

"Humph! I don't like that, lad."

"Neither do I."

They hurried on, looking back every few steps, but the Indians did not again show themselves.

"Sure you didn't make a mistake?" asked the man presently.

"No, I am sure I saw them," declared Mark. "One was a little ahead of the others."

"Armed?"

"I didn't notice, but they must be."

"We'd stand a poor show of defending ourselves against a reg'lar band o' redskins," muttered Josiah Socket. "Wish we was to the cabins and safe indoors."

"So do I."

With the Indians on their trail—for they felt certain they were being followed—all thoughts of resting for the night were driven from the mind of each. Yet they felt they could not go two whole days and a night without a stop of some sort.

By nightfall it was snowing harder than ever, and Mark suggested they leave the regular trail and sneak into the forest to the southward.

“The snow will cover our footprints and maybe they will lose us in the darkness,” he added.

Josiah Socket was willing to try the experiment, and while passing over a wind-swept turn they left their former trail and hurried in among the trees. Then they passed over some rocks and into something of a hollow, where they came to a halt, with some high rocks behind them.

Here they waited over an hour in the darkness without anything coming to disturb them. Then, worn out, Mark dropped asleep, leaving Josiah Socket on guard for the time being.

CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER BRUSH WITH THE INDIANS

WHEN Mark awoke all was dark around him. He lay quiet for several minutes and then sat up.

"Mr. Socket!" he called out.

There was no answer, and much surprised the youth leaped to his feet. He saw a form some feet away and sprang toward it. It was that of Josiah Socket, and the man lay flat on his back in the snow.

"What is the matter? What has happened to you?" called out the boy and knelt down at the man's side. He saw that blood was flowing from a bruise on the right temple.

For answer there was a groan, and then Josiah Socket opened his eyes and tried to struggle to his feet. But he was too weak to do so.

"The Indians!" he gasped. "Our hosses and packs——" He could get no further.

Mark gave one glance around and then ran to where the horses had been tied up. Both steeds

were gone, and so were the precious packs containing all the stores they had purchased.

"Did the Indians take them?"

"Yes. They came up behind me an'—an' knocked me over," groaned Josiah Socket. He put a hand to his temple. "I thought they were going to kill me!"

"How long ago was this?"

"I don't—don't know. I was knocked out clean an' clear. Oh, Mark, this the worst yet! Supplies an' hosses both gone!"

"Can't we follow them up?"

"An' get shot?"

"I don't care—I am not going to stand for being robbed in this fashion," answered the youth, recklessly. "Those supplies cost too much money, and, besides, we have got to have them."

In a few minutes Josiah Socket felt somewhat better. The cut on his temple was not serious, and he washed it with some snow and bound it up with his handkerchief. In the meantime Mark made a hasty search around and found that both of their weapons were at hand, the Indians having overlooked them in their haste to get away with the packs and the horses.

The snow had ceased and they made a light and lit a couple of cedar boughs for torches. By examining the ground they came upon the tracks of

four red men, who had moved off in the direction of the lower valley, leading the two horses between them.

"Let us follow them," said Mark, without hesitation. "We ought to be able to bring them to terms with the gun and the pistol."

Now that he felt a little better, Josiah Socket was willing, and keeping their torches shaded somewhat, they followed the newly-made trail through the forest and down into the valley a distance of two miles. It was now growing light in the east, telling that the dawn of a new day was at hand.

"I see them!" cried Mark, presently. "Put out that torch." And he threw his own down in the snow and stamped upon it. His companion speedily followed his example, and both leaped to the shelter of some bushes.

The Indians were at rest, having traveled probably the whole of the day before and being worn out. They sat in the shelter of some trees, with the horses and their packs close by.

What to do next Josiah Socket and Mark scarcely knew. But they were determined to get back their belongings even if it cost them something to do it.

"Mr. Socket, haven't I heard you whistle to those horses?" asked Mark, in a whisper.

"Certainly—I often call 'em that way. Learnt it to 'em when they was colts."

"Would they come if you whistled to them now?"

"I think so."

"Then let us get behind the trees and get our weapons ready for use."

The man understood Mark's plan and did as requested. When all was in readiness a clear and peculiar whistle was given. At once the steeds pricked up their ears.

"Whistle again!" said Mark, and Josiah Socket did so. Then the horses came running toward their owner, much to the astonishment of the Indians, who leaped up in alarm.

"Here they come, and with the loads!" cried Mark. "Come on!"

As soon as the horses came up they urged the steeds onward, in the direction of the trail to the cabins. Then Josiah Socket fired a shot at the Indians and Mark did the same. One red man was hit in the shoulder and another in the leg, and with howls of pain the Indians ran back and out of sight behind some trees.

"Now we have got to dust for it," said Mark. "For all we know, they may come after us hot-footed."

They urged the horses into a run and kept close

to the animals' sides. They expected a shot from the Indians, but none came, for the reason that the red men were armed only with clubs and bows and arrows, and they were too far off for the last named to take effect.

They kept on until Mark was about ready to drop from exhaustion. Then coming to a high cliff, at the base of which was something of a hollow, they led the horses into the shelter and dropped down in the snow and reloaded.

"See anything of them?" asked Mark, peering along the trail they had left.

"Not a sign of anything, lad."

"If they come we'll have to fire another shot."

"Right you are."

They rested an hour, and then, as tired as they were, went on again. The sun was now out clear and strong, so that they could see a long distance around them.

"I see them!" said Mark, after another three miles had been covered. "I really believe they are getting ready to attack us again!"

Slowly and cautiously the red men drew closer. One limped painfully, showing where a shot had taken effect.

"I'll fire first," said Josiah Socket. "They don't deserve no mercy."

He raised the gun he carried and blazed away.

The bullet clipped the blanket of one of the Indians and he lost no time in dropping to the rear. But the others came on, and raised something of a war cry.

"If they can get at us, they will kill us!" gasped Mark, and took aim with his pistol. His shot told, and one red man fell, wounded in the knee. Then the others halted to consult together.

As soon as their weapons were discharged, our friends loaded up again and moved onward. Not once did they allow the horses to stop and they kept on a slow run beside them. Ahead was a turn in the trail and they hoped to find a safe shelter behind some other rocks and crags.

"Hullo, there is somebody!" ejaculated Mark, as the turn ahead was made. "It's Bob!"

"And there is Si, too!" put in Josiah Socket. "And both are armed!"

"Hullo there!" sang out Bob, coming up. "What the firing about?"

"Indians," said Mark.

"You don't say!" cried Si. "Where are they?"

"Back of us," put in Josiah Socket. "I'm glad you have the rifle and the shotgun," he continued.

"We thought we'd come out to meet you and

also to look for game," explained Bob. "I see the Indians now."

Two of the red men had shown themselves around the bend of the trail. They gazed in astonishment and disappointment at the new arrivals.

"Give 'em a dose o' buckshot," said Josiah Socket to Bob. "They deserve it."

"So they do," added Mark.

Bob brought up the shotgun and let drive. The gun scattered widely and both of the red men were peppered. With yells of pain they turned back and fled to where they had left their companions. It was the last seen of the Indians for a long time to come.

As soon as they were certain the Indians had gone, our friends continued the journey to the cabins. Bob and Si had brought down half a dozen rabbits, and they told about the big bear that had been laid low.

"That's prime news," said Josiah Socket. "The bear, along with the provisions in the packs, will give us all we want to eat until spring comes."

They had to rest twice before the cabins were reached, for the horses were all but exhausted. They kept their eyes wide open for the appearance of the enemy, but nothing came to alarm them.

"Those redskins have evidently learnt their lesson," said Josiah Socket, "and if so, I am glad of it."

When they were still at a distance the Socket boys came running to greet their father and Mrs. Socket was at the doorway to welcome her husband. When the woman heard about the brush with the Indians she almost fainted.

"It's a wonder you weren't both killed!" she declared. "Josiah, you must be very careful how you venture out after this."

"I'm a-goin' to be careful," answered the husband.

"And you must be careful too, Mark."

"I'll keep my eyes wide open," said the boy.

The next day there was something of a celebration. A big haunch of venison was roasted, some turnips cooked and beans baked, and Mrs. Socket made some biscuits and some "real downright coffee," as Maybe Dixon named it. They feasted for over an hour, and never did a meal taste better to any of them. A good appetite and a touch of hunger are always the best sauce in the world for a square meal.

CHAPTER XXII

THE COMING OF SPRING

SLOWLY the winter wore away to the three boys, each anxious for spring to arrive, that they might hunt for gold. There was a good deal of snow, and some biting cold weather, and then it began to moderate slowly but surely, until the ice in the river broke away and the snow disappeared from the valley as if by magic.

"Hurrah! Spring at last!" cried Mark, one day when the sun came out extra strong. "I am not sorry for it."

"Sorry?" cried Bob. "Why, I could dance a jig for joy." And he did a few steps in front of the cabin.

The boys had already decided upon where to try their luck first—up the valley on the opposite side of the river, which soon began to flow swiftly, as the snow in the mountains melted.

"If you don't find anything in one place we can easily try another," said Si. "We can go where we please, so long as we don't work on some

staked-out claim." They had already learned that to work on another person's claim was considered a great crime in the gold country.

Maybe Dixon was going to stick with them, "through thick or thin," as he expressed it. He had taken a strong liking to all three youths and could not think of separating from them.

The Sockets were going further down the valley,—to the Feather River,—and soon they parted from their friends.

"I shan't forget what I owe you," said Mark to Josiah Socket.

"Take your own time about paying," answered the man. And then he and his family moved off, pack and baggage, and the others did not see them again for some time.

It was an important day when the three boys and Maybe Dixon set out to make their first hunt for gold. The lads were wild with excitement. One carried a pick, another a shovel, and Si had the washing pan,—an article shaped somewhat like a broad coal hod, with little tin ridges on the front slope. This was one sort of washing pan, and there were numerous others.

An hour of stiff walking brought them to a spot Maybe Dixon thought inviting, and they set to work, close to the stream, to dig up the sand and dirt and proceed to the washing.

"I'll wash the first panful," said the man, "and then you can all try your hands at it. You've got to learn, and there ain't no time so good as the present."

"If the first panful only pans out good," whispered Si, hopefully.

All stood around and watched the process of washing with keen interest. The loose dirt came away quickly and then more water was put in, and Maybe Dixon showed how to get rid of the fine sand and small stones. At last the pan was almost empty.

"Any gold?" asked Bob, in a voice he tried his best to steady.

Maybe Dixon looked at the pan bottom with great care.

"Not a smell," he declared.

"Oh!" came from the three boys, and each followed with a long sigh.

"Ain't no use to git discouraged yet," said the man, hopefully. "We may go days before we strike paying dirt."

"I thought gold was everywhere," said Si.

They continued to dig and wash for an hour, each trying the pan. But nothing in the way of gold was brought to light. Then they moved to another locality and went through the whole process over again.

"No gold," murmured Mark, and his face showed his disappointment.

"I thought sure we'd strike something," said Bob.

"Perhaps after all we ought to have followed Mr. Socket down the valley," put in Si. "He said this district didn't look like gold to him."

"You can't tell from general appearances, not unless you're an expert," said Maybe Dixon. "Maybe by to-morrow we'll be having better luck."

They continued to dig and to wash, trying half a dozen different places, up and down the stream. But it was of no use, and at sundown they returned to their cabin much downcast.

"And doesn't my back ache!" declared Mark, bracing up with a grimace.

"It will ache, until you get used to digging," said Si, who was not bothered that way. Bob felt a little stiff, but Mark suffered the most by far.

The next morning they went out again, this time taking to a small creek that flowed into the river. They followed the creek for nearly half a mile, when they came to something of a hollow, surrounded by rocks and filled with sand.

"That sand ought to have something in it," declared Maybe Dixon. "But if we want it, we'll

have to wade in and git it,—and it's putty cold as yet."

"I'll go in," said Mark. "I always took cold baths when I was at home, and I shan't mind it so very much."

He took off his shoes and stockings, rolled up his trousers, and waded in. The sand was loose and he easily scooped up a panful, which he handed to Bob, who proceeded to the washing. Soon they got to the bottom, where only a little coarse sand remained, mixed with specks of a dull coppery color.

"There's your gold!" cried Maybe Dixon. "Told you it would be there!"

"Is that really gold?" asked Si, doubtfully.

"To be sure it is, my boy."

"I thought gold was always shiny, like a gold ring or a watch."

"Not always. Some of it has to be cleaned."

"How much is there—I mean what is it worth?" questioned Bob.

"They say it is worth sixteen dollars an ounce," answered Mark. "I should think there was at least an eighth of an ounce there."

"Two dollars' worth of gold, just about," said Maybe Dixon, calculating with his eyes.

"It don't look it," said Si, almost in a whisper. "Why, that's fifty cents each all around!" And

he gazed at the others with a grin of pleasure. "I'd have to work a whole day on the farm for that!" he added.

"Some panfuls may not be so good and some may be better," said Maybe Dixon. "In hunting for gold you've got to take what comes, every time."

They soon had another panful to wash and then half a dozen more. Mark did not remain in the water excepting when he drew up the sand and dirt. Yet it was cold labor, as he soon realized.

"This will be all right two months from now," he said. "But just now it is a little too cold."

"Thought you'd feel it," was Maybe Dixon's comment. "Don't you git cramps in your feet, or you'll have rheumatism or some other pesky thing to make you miserable."

They drew up, all told, about half an ounce of gold and then the bottom of the hollow was practically exhausted. Then they went further up the creek and tried a smaller hollow, which they scooped out by standing on some overhanging rocks. Here the first panful gave them all of a quarter of an ounce of gold.

"Four dollars' worth!" exclaimed Si. "How is that for ten minutes' work! Hurrah! Our fortunes are made!"

"Not quite, Si," answered Mark. "But I am mighty glad we've struck something."

They kept at the creek all of that day and for the balance of the week. On Saturday night they got the gold that had been found together and weighed it in a tiny scales Maybe Dixon had brought along.

"Two ounces and a half," said the man.

"At sixteen dollars an ounce that means just forty dollars," said Bob, quickly.

"Ten dollars each," came from Si. "That ain't so terrible bad for four days' work."

"And not so good either," put in Mark, quickly. "Boys, we have got to do better, or I shall be disappointed."

"I don't know as all gold is worth sixteen dollars an ounce," said Maybe Dixon. "We may have to sell it for fourteen dollars, or even as low as twelve dollars."

"We'll get the best price we can."

"Now how are we to divide?" said Bob, looking at Maybe Dixon. "We boys agreed long ago to share and share alike."

"I am willing to go in the same way, so long as all keep on working," said Maybe Dixon. "We can divide up whatever we find into four parts instead of three."

All of the boys were satisfied and said so, and

then they shook hands with their new partner. It was agreed that for the present Bob and Mark should work together as one "team" and Si and Maybe Dixon as another. All agreed to go down the stream a little further and try another creek Mark had discovered.

The following week found them harder at work than ever. Mark's back often ached from the labor, but he did not complain. His thoughts, and the thoughts of all, were centered on finding gold.

The second week's work netted them fifty dollars and the third week brought in nearly a hundred. All of the gold was placed in a chamois bag, secreted in a chink of the cabin wall, behind a slab of wood.

During the third week several other gold seekers drifted into that locality and three claims were staked out. But our friends staked no claim, content to wander around until they struck "something worth while," as Mark put it.

The Indians had not shown themselves again, but from one miner who came up the creek they learned that a shack two miles away had been plundered by the red men and the owner half killed. A posse had gotten after the Indians and one had been badly wounded. The rest of the band had fled to parts unknown.

CHAPTER XXIII

NUGGETS OF VALUE

"WELL, where shall we try our luck next?"

It was Mark who asked that question. He was resting in front of the cabin mending a hole in his shirt. The hard work of the past six weeks had told on his clothing and he often had to sit down and do some mending.

The young gold hunters had been fairly successful but not nearly as much so as they wished. The chamois bag held about four hundred dollars' worth of dust, which meant a hundred dollars each for the partners.

"Good enough wages," said Bob. "But I came out here to win my fortune."

"And so did I," answered Mark, and then asked the question, "Well, where shall we try our luck next?"

"This district seems about used up," said Si. "I move we go to some other place."

"A man told me yesterday things looked good over to a place called Three Cross Gulch," said

Maybe Dixon. "If you want to try it over there, say the word, and I'll be with ye."

"How far is that from here?" questioned Mark.

"He said about twenty miles."

"Then we will have to give up the cabin."

"That is so, too, but we didn't expect to stay here all the time, anyway."

"Of course we didn't."

"Let us go to Three Cross Gulch to-morrow!" cried Si, impetuously. He was getting the gold fever good and strong, now that he saw gold was really to be had.

"Three Cross Gulch it is!" exclaimed Bob; and so it was settled.

The rest had done Darling good and he spent the whole day in wandering around the river bank, picking up odds and ends to eat. He was perfectly willing to carry the load they put on him the next morning, and by ten o'clock they bid farewell to their old camping spot and struck out for the new diggings Maybe Dixon had mentioned.

The way was far from an easy one, and they had their own troubles in getting into the gulch, which had suddenly become the scene of great activity. Miners were pouring in from everywhere, and tents were springing up "like mushrooms," as Bob expressed it.

"We'll have to see if we can't get a tent," said

Mark, and for that purpose visited a spot where a jolly German was selling all manner of supplies which he had brought to the place from San Francisco on the backs of eight horses.

"Yah! I can sell you von dent," said the German. "I got dree left," and he brought them out.

Two were new and the third had seen slight service. They thought this latter might answer their purpose, and asked the man what he wanted for it.

"I sold you dot dent for four ounces," said the German.

"Four ounces!" cried Mark.

"Why, that's about sixty-four dollars!" gasped Si. "The tent didn't cost more than ten or twelve!"

"Yah, but he cost a lot to git him here," said the man who sold supplies.

"You won't take less?" asked Bob.

"*Nein*, I cannot do dot."

"I reckon it's a case of take it or leave it," said Maybe Dixon. "We had better take him up, for I don't see any other chance to get canvas."

"All right, but it breaks my heart to give up four ounces of gold for it," groaned Si.

They took the tent, and then purchased some other supplies which they desired. That night they stretched the canvas over some bushes and

slept under it. The next day they cut poles and pitched the tent in proper shape, cutting a trench around it, so that the rain might run off and keep the ground inside dry. They covered the flooring with bark, and made several couches of pine boughs.

The next week found them working hard in two claims they had staked out. Not much gold in the dust was found, but quite some of the precious metal in grains which occasionally reached to the size of nuggets.

"Nuggets are what I want," cried Bob. "A good big nugget beats dust all to pieces!"

"Dust is all right, if you can only git enough of it," answered Maybe Dixon.

At the end of the second week at Three Cross Gulch they calculated that they had brought in over three hundred dollars' worth of dust and small nuggets. The largest of the nuggets was found by Si and was thought to be worth fifty to sixty dollars. It made the former farm lad dance a jig for joy.

"I've got to send news of that to hum," he said. "Gosh, but this beats farmin' all to bits, don't it?"

"Like to get a market basket full of 'em, eh, Si?" said Mark, dryly.

"Wouldn't you?"

"You bet!" laughed Mark, dropping into the common expression of the day.

The weather was growing steadily warmer, and soon the buds began to come out and the grass took on its coat of green. Sleeping in the tent was quite comfortable, and the boys declared it would have been stuffy to have remained in a cabin.

Mark was getting hardened to the labor and it was but seldom that his back ached as it had when he had first taken hold. They soon gave up one claim as next to worthless and all four of the partners labored along a small brook flowing into the gulch, which was dry a good part of the time, the water soaking away in the sandy bottom.

It was late on Friday afternoon that Mark and Bob were digging around the bottom of a big boulder which was imbedded in the dark sand. They had uncovered some fair-sized grains of gold and were trying to reach the bottom of the "sand pocket," as they called it.

"Not a great deal of gold here," remarked Bob. "But I guess it is worth working for."

"We are making more than fair wages, Bob."

"Oh, I know that, Mark. But when a fellow gets used to making big money he hates to drop back."

"That is so too. But let us go down to the bottom here, anyway."

"That is what I calculate to do. The most gold will lie next to the rock under the sand."

They continued to labor. It was hard work and both were in a heavy perspiration. But at last they got down to the bottom rock and Mark brought out what was left of the sand on his shovel.

"Look!"

"Look!"

Both boys gave the cry and each stooped to pick up a dull yellowish lump. Mark secured it and carried it to where the light could fall upon it.

"A nugget of gold!"

"Yes, and a good-sized one too!"

"What do you suppose it is worth?"

"According to the worth of the one Si found this must count up to four or five hundred dollars!"

"Great mackerel, Mark! Now we are doing something, aren't we?"

"Let us see if there are any more."

In a fever of excitement the two boys began to bring away what was left of the sand. They found six other nuggets, but all much smaller. Then they went over the sand with care, getting out the dust and small grains.

"This is the best find yet," declared Mark. "We've got at least six hundred dollars' worth of nuggets and dust here!"

"That's the kind of a find to make!"

In high delight they went to the tent and a few minutes later Si and Maybe Dixon came in. Both were smiling.

"We got about two hundred dollars' worth of nuggets," said Si, in a whisper, so that nobody in the other tents close at hand might hear.

"And look what we got," said Mark, showing the big nugget.

"And these too," added Bob, bringing forth the balance of the find.

"Well, just to look at that!" cried Maybe Dixon. "Say, we are striking it lucky, we are!"

Sitting down by candlelight, with the flaps of the tent carefully closed from curious eyes, they brought out their scales and calculated the worth of the find. As Maybe Dixon figured it, they had between seven hundred and fifty and eight hundred dollars' worth of gold.

"Think of that for one day's work!" cried Si. "Why, it is more than a man can earn in a year on a farm!"

"Hush, Si! not so loud," said Mark, warningly. "Somebody may hear you."

"That's so, I forgot," answered the former

farm lad. "I'll be more careful after this," he added, in a whisper.

"We have certainly done very well," said Maybe Dixon. "Maybe to-morrow we'll do still better."

"We're getting nuggets, that's certain," said Mark. "At this rate it won't take us long to get a fortune together."

"Oh, we can't expect such luck to last," said Bob.

"Why not, I'd like to know?" demanded Si. "Now we have struck our gait, let us keep it up."

"I am willing to keep it up—if I can," laughed the former sailor boy. "Nothing would suit me better."

With great care they put the nuggets away in a gold bag. Maybe Dixon had been carrying it around with him, but now it was decided to hide the bag.

"I know a place," said Si, and mentioned a hollow tree just back of the tent. "Nobody would look for it there."

He had just spoken when from outside of the tent there came a sudden strong sneeze.

"Hullo! somebody is out there!" cried Maybe Dixon.

"He must have heard what I said!" gasped Si. Mark sprang for the flap of the tent and threw



"A NUGGET OF GOLD!" CRIED MARK.—P. 200.

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it open. Outside all was dark, and a puff of wind blew out their candle.

"I see a man!" cried Bob, pointing to a dim figure, hurrying toward some brush a hundred feet away. "Hi! stop!" he yelled. But the man kept on and soon disappeared in the gloom of the night.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RESULTS OF A CAVE-IN

"THAT proves one thing," said Mark, after the brief excitement was at an end. "Some folks in this camp are pretty nosy."

"Maybe it will prove more'n that," returned Maybe Dixon.

"You think there are thieves around?" asked Bob, quickly.

"Would it be something to wonder at, lad—with so much gold in the hands of the miners? Some men would rather steal than work."

"That's a fact," said Si. "And we'll have to be careful of what we have."

"I'd like to know who that man was," observed Mark. "Did you get any kind of a look at him at all, Bob? You've got the best eyes in this crowd."

"He looked to be rather tall. I didn't see his face."

"Then you couldn't place him?"

"No."

They returned to the tent and the candle was again lit. By its feeble rays they put the gold in the bag and placed the bag in a tin box which had contained spices.

"I don't think we'd better use the hollow tree," said Si. "That feller, whoever he was, must have heard me mention it."

They knew not what to do with their gold, but at last dug a hole at the back of the tent and placed it, tin box and all, in that, covering it with dirt, a flat stone, and some pine boughs.

"It will take an hour's digging to get it out," said Maybe Dixon. "A thief would hardly dare to tackle the job, with so many around who know us."

"I've got an idea," said Bob. "Let us put a bogus bag in the hollow tree and see if that rascal comes for it."

This was considered a good scheme and was acted upon the next morning, a bag of sand being carefully tied up and sealed. It was placed in the hollow tree and some dead leaves strewn over it.

For the next few days the boys and their older partner worked as never before. They brought to light eight other small nuggets and some grains and dust, worth, all told, not less than three hundred dollars. With such good results, they did

not mind the back-breaking labor, and if they were so stiff in the morning that they scarcely cared to move, nobody complained. They were working deep down in the sand and nobody was near them.

"How is it?" asked one old miner, coming up to Bob one day.

"Fair," answered the youth, as carelessly as he could.

"Not bringing out anything big, eh?"

"Not very big."

"I don't think this gulch is worth shucks. I am going elsewhere," and the old miner slouched off with his pick, shovel, and pan over his shoulder.

"That's where he is missing it," whispered Si. "But we can't tell him the truth—he'd come down on us and so would a hundred others, in no time. We want to keep as much of this gulch to ourselves as we can. We've got too many neighbors already."

"Si, you're gittin' to be a wise boy," remarked Maybe Dixon, with an approving nod of his head. "When you spot a good thing, be sure an' keep it to yourself, is my motto."

That evening Bob looked into the hollow tree and then burst into the tent in excitement.

"It's gone!"

"What?" asked Si, who was frying some fish Mark had brought in.

"The bag we put in the hollow tree."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Maybe Dixon.

"Then that man was a thief after all."

"We can be thankful he had to sneeze," remarked Mark. "That was worth our whole capital."

"I'd give ten dollars to know who it was," said Bob.

"I go in for warning the rest of the miners around here," declared Si. "If there is a thief around all the honest men ought to know it."

This was considered good reasoning, and after supper Si and Mark strolled around to the various tents dotting the gulch and told of what had occurred.

"Well! well! so it's got that far, sonny," cried one brawny miner. "I will be on my guard after this. If anybody comes near my tent he'll get a dose of cold lead that won't agree with his digestion." And he tapped his big pistol significantly. All of the miners were thankful for being warned, and each promised to be on guard.

"Of course the would-be thief may be among those we warned," said Mark, on returning to his own tent. "But if so, he'll realize that we will stand for no more such treachery."

Several days passed, including Sunday, which was spent in resting up and in looking over their clothing. The boys also took a bath, in a pool of spring water back of the camp, which was both healthful and refreshing.

Monday afternoon found Mark and Bob working at the bottom of a deep sand hole near the end of the gulch. Si and Maybe Dixon were not far away. Each of the party had found some small nuggets, but nothing of great value.

"We must be careful here," said Mark, as he got to the bottom of the hole. "This sand is none too firm."

"Oh, I reckon it will hold," cried Bob, who was scraping away industriously with his shovel. "But we can't go much further, to my way of thinking. We have about reached bed rock."

"That is so. And I think—Oh! help!"

Mark got no further, for at that instant the sand began to crumble down on one side of the hole. He made a wild spring for the other side and caught hold of a rope which they had been using for hoisting sand that they wanted to wash. As he went up, the whole hole caved in, burying him up to his knees. Bob was completely covered and could do absolutely nothing to save himself.

Mark continued to call for aid, and soon Si and Maybe Dixon came running to the spot.

"Hullo, Mark is caught in the sand hole!" cried the former farm boy.

"Save me, and save Bob!" gasped Mark, who was trying his best to get away from the sand which held him.

"Where is Bob?"

"At the bottom of the hole."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Maybe Dixon. "Boys, we've got to dig him out an' do it quick, or maybe he'll be smothered!"

It was an easy task to drag Mark from the top of the opening, and this done they set to work to dig the sand from the hole. Mark and Maybe Dixon worked with their hands until Si brought up some shovels. In the meantime they called to two other miners who were not far away.

"A cave-in, eh?" said one of the miners, running up.

"Worse," said Mark. "Bob Billings is at the bottom of the hole."

"Gee shoo! Ye don't tell me!" cried the miner. "We must git him out."

"Thet's the talk, Jim," said his partner, and they pitched in with a will, and soon all on top of the ground were making the sand fly in all directions.

It was no easy matter to keep the sand from caving in again and one of the miners ran off and

soon brought back several short boards, with which one side of the hole was shored up. Then, a few seconds later, Mark uttered a cry as he uncovered the top of the handle of a pick.

"Bob had hold of that when the cave-in came,"

"Maybe he has hold of it still," suggested Maybe Dixon.

Mark took hold of the pick handle and pulled upon it.

"Bob! Bob!" he called out loudly.

"Here!" came faintly through the hole made by the moving of the pick handle.

"Hold fast, can you?"

"I'll try."

As many as could get at the handle pulled with might and main, and soon the handle came up, and the sand with it, forming a round mound. Then from the middle of the mound came Bob, white, limp, and all but exhausted.

"Bob, are you hurt?" asked Mark, anxiously, as he assisted his chum to firmer ground.

"I—I don't know," was the answer, and then poor Bob sank in a heap, too weak to stand. They made him as comfortable as they could and presently he got back his breath and sat up.

"I—I guess I am all right," he gasped. "But say, I don't want to be buried alive again!"

"Shouldn't think you would want to," said Si.

"I wouldn't want to have it happen to me for a million dollars!"

"I thought I'd never be dug out."

"We went to work as fast as we could."

"I know it, and I am very thankful," said Bob, and thanked the miners from outside who had come to his aid. Then he limped to the tent, leaning on Si's arm, and Mark came limping behind the pair.

"That is one of the perils of mining," said Maybe Dixon. "You ought never to go into a deep hole unless you have the sides properly shored up."

"I'll remember that," said Bob.

"And so will I," added Mark.

Neither of the boys suffered much from the cave-in. But it taught them a valuable lesson, and they took care never to be caught again in that manner.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MAN FROM PHILADELPHIA

SPRING passed and soon came summer, with its heat and its flies, mosquitoes, ants, and other insects. But the boys and Maybe Dixon were doing well and paid small attention to the pests that came to bother them.

They had moved from Three Cross Gulch to another spot fifty miles away called White Rock Gulch. Here they had located two claims, and both were panning out very well. At White Rock Gulch they did only surface mining, following up the gulch and its various tributaries for miles. They took out a good deal of coarse gold, and once Maybe Dixon got out a nugget worth at least a hundred and fifty dollars.

All told, they calculated that they had about three thousand dollars' worth of gold on hand. They might have had several hundred dollars' worth more but living was very high, and they did not want to go without at least some good things, although Si, who was used to scant farm

fare, sometimes shook his head when the others paid a dollar a pound for sugar, three dollars for coffee, and two dollars per pound for steak that was a long way from being porterhouse in quality. Fortunately, however, high prices did not last and by August they could get the articles mentioned for a third of the figures given.

One day Mark took the mule and rode off to a fair-sized settlement known as Bender's because the chief storekeeper was Captain Samuel Bender. This place was twelve miles from where the camp of our friends was located, and it took the youth and the animal three hours to cover the distance over the uneven hilly trail.

Mark spent two hours in doing some trading and in seeing the sights. At one spot was an amusement hall, and he stopped for a few minutes to listen to some music on a banjo and watch a colored man dance a breakdown. Near at hand was an open bar at which several men were drinking.

As was natural, the men at the bar presently caught the youth's eye and he looked them over, wondering if he had seen any of them before. One looked strangely familiar and Mark cudgeled his brain to place the individual.

"I know I've seen him somewhere," thought the boy. "The question is where? Did I meet him

on the trail, or elsewhere? I am sure he isn't a miner."

Presently the man turned away from the bar, and walked past Mark. He gave the youth a sharp look, and then both started.

"Hullo!" cried Mark, involuntarily.

"Hullo yourself," said the man, gruffly. "Where—er—where have I met you before?"

"In Philadelphia," answered Mark, quickly.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, you got into my step-father's office by mistake one day."

"Did I? I don't remember it," said the man, coldly. He had fully recovered his self-possession.

"Yes, I met you on the stairs. I was going up and you were coming down."

"Is that so? It has slipped my mind entirely." The man pretended to yawn. "What's your name?"

"Mark Radley. My step-father's name is Jadell Powers."

"I don't know him."

"What is your name?"

"Morgan Fitzsimmons."

"You are from Philadelphia, aren't you?"

"I have been there a few times," answered Morgan Fitzsimmons, and pretended to yawn

again. "I am a great traveler. Just now I am doing the gold fields."

"Then you are not going to try your luck at mining?"

"Hardly." The man gave a short laugh. "I am not used to such hard work. Are you at it?"

"Yes."

"Here?"

"No, over to White Rock Gulch."

"Alone or with your step-father?"

"I am with three friends."

"Then your step-father didn't come out?"

"Not that I know of. I haven't heard from him for some time."

"I'll wager a dollar you ran away from home," said Morgan Fitzsimmons, with a smile that Mark did not admire—it was so full of sarcastic cunning.

"Maybe you know that I did run away," said the boy, boldly.

"Me! Why—er—not at all," stammered the man. "What makes you think that?" he added and gave Mark a sharp look, as if to read his very thoughts.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Mark. "Are you stopping here?"

"Yes, for a few days."

"And after that?"

"I don't know where I will go. But see here, boy——"

"I may see you again," said Mark, and walked away, before Morgan Fitzsimmons could ask him any more questions.

Mark's heart was beating rapidly. He recognized the man fully as the individual who had come away from his step-father's office on that fateful day when the safe had been robbed of three hundred dollars.

"He looks just slick enough to be the robber," thought Mark. "But how am I going to prove it out here and at this time?"

He thought the matter over carefully, and some time later tied his mule to a tree and went again in search of Morgan Fitzsimmons. He found that individual in another drinking place, playing cards with two innocent-looking miners.

"Another five dollars gone," he heard one of the miners say. "I am in hard luck to-day."

"So am I," said the other miner. "Don't think I am going to play any more," he added, as he arose from the bench on which he was sitting.

"Give you a chance to win your money back if you say so," said Morgan Fitzsimmons, carelessly.

"Another time," said the miner, and then he moved away, followed by his companion. Mor-

gan Fitzsimmons took the money lying on the table and put it in his pocket.

"Have something with me," he said, to the man who was keeping the bar.

"I will and I'll have more," said the other individual, coolly.

"How much more?"

"I get twenty-five per cent. of a straight game."

"That's a pretty steep rake-off."

"And I get fifty per cent. of a crooked game," said the man who ran the establishment.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, Mr. Fitzsimmons, that I want half of what you got out of Dinky Blade and Jack Wilson."

"Hum!" Morgan Fitzsimmons was taken somewhat aback. "Then—er—you mean to say——"

"Better say nothing, my dear friend. I understand you and you'll understand me, sooner or later. You won forty dollars. Hand over twenty and call for what you please."

Morgan Fitzsimmons glared at the keeper of the place and the other man eyed him coolly. Then the gambler and swindler—for Fitzsimmons was nothing less—passed over four five-dollar bills, after which the keeper of the resort treated

him to some liquor. Then the pair became quite confidential.

Mark had slipped around to a side window and was taking in the scene with keen interest. He saw what it all meant. Morgan Fitzsimmons had played cards with the miners and swindled them out of forty dollars. The keeper of the resort was willing to wink at the transaction and let it pass for one-half of the ill-gotten gains. Now Fitzsimmons was evidently arranging to do more "business" in the future, on the same basis.

"He is a rascal—fully as bad as Sag Ruff," thought Mark. "And that being so, it is more than likely he stole that three hundred dollars from the office safe. I wish I could corner him in some way and bring him to justice. That would clear my name. I suppose Mr. Powers still thinks I am guilty."

The talk between the keeper of the resort and Morgan Fitzsimmons went on for some time and then the gambler drew back.

"I'll be on hand every night this week," said he. "We'll make a big thing of this, trust me for it."

"All right, Mr. Fitzsimmons. But mind, not a word to anybody of it."

"Trust me," and then Fitzsimmons walked away. Mark watched him go down the rude

street until he came to a row of shanties which were used for boarding places. He passed into one of them and to a room he had evidently rented for the time being.

"Here is where he is hanging out," Mark told himself. "I'll remember that."

The boy went back to where he had left his mule and soon found shelter for himself and the animal. Early in the morning he went back to White Rock Gulch with his stock of provisions.

Mark had long since acquainted all of his companions with his past history and each believed thoroughly in his innocence. All listened with interest to the story he had to tell about Morgan Fitzsimmons.

"I want to know what you would do if you were in my place," said he, after he had finished. "I am satisfied in my own mind that he is the rascal who robbed my step-father."

"But what proof have you got, Mark?" asked Maybe Dixon. "You can't have a man arrested unless you have proof against him."

"I haven't any proof excepting that I saw him coming down the stairs."

"Did anybody else see him?" asked Bob.

"I do not know, but I think not."

"Then I don't see what you can do," went on Maybe Dixon. "In a court of law his word is

as good as yours, commonly speaking, although the fact that he is a gambler may go against him."

"And a swindler—if you can prove that," put in Si.

They talked the matter over whenever they got the chance that day, but reached no conclusion of value. Then Mark cooled down a little, and resolved to let the matter rest for a while.

"But I'll tell you what I am going to do," he said, suddenly. "I am going to write to my stepfather and let him know where I am and how I am getting along, and I'll tell him all I know about this Morgan Fitzsimmons. Then if he wants to do anything, let him go ahead, and I'll help him all I can."

"Maybe he will get after you for running away," said Maybe Dixon.

"I am not afraid of him any more," answered Mark. "I think he will let me alone when he learns how well I am doing—especially if I promise not to bother him about a settlement of my heritage."

The whole party was doing very well at White Rock Gulch. On the day that Mark went away Bob found several fair-sized nuggets, and when Mark went to work he came across a pocket containing several nuggets as big as peas. Then Si and Maybe Dixon capped the good fortune by

finding twin nuggets, one fitting into the other, and both together worth not less than four hundred dollars.

"Talk about getting rich!" cried the former farm boy. "Say, this beats hoeing corn all to pieces," and he danced a jig for joy.

"If only our good fortune keeps up," said Bob, with his face on a broad grin.

"Well, it seems to be keeping up," said Mark. "At this rate we'll have quite a pile laid by when winter comes."

"Don't mention winter yet!" exclaimed Si. "I don't want to think of giving up digging gold. It's too much fun!"

CHAPTER XXVI

MARK'S SICKNESS

A FEW days later Mark was working hard at the bottom of a deep hole, with the hot sun blazing down upon him when he suddenly felt queer in his head. He staggered and leaned up against the dirt.

"What's the matter, Mark?" questioned Si, who was working with him at the time.

"I—I don't feel right—my—my head is swimming around," gasped Mark.

He had been affected by the strong sunshine, and Si called for help without delay. Bob came running up, and he and the former farm lad carried their sick chum away from the hole and up to the tent on the hillside. Then Maybe Dixon appeared.

"Soak his head in the coldest water you can find," said the old miner, and Bob ran off with a pail to a spring coming from some rocks behind the camp. When the water was brought they saturated towel after towel and put it on Mark's

head. They also fanned him and opened the tent front and back, that the breeze might blow through.

"I am afraid he will be a sick boy for some time," said Maybe Dixon. "Maybe it will take all summer for him to git over it."

"Oh, don't say that!" cried Bob, deeply distressed. The idea of any of the party having a serious spell of sickness had never before occurred to him. "Can't we get a doctor somewhere?"

"I heard there was a doctor over to the settlement," said Si. "Jerry Bangs got some pills from him."

"Then let us go and get him," answered Bob. "We've got plenty of money to pay him with."

Bob determined to go over to the settlement the very next day, leaving Si to look after Mark and Maybe Dixon to work at the claims and watch them, so that nobody might "jump" their belongings. The week before a valuable claim had been "jumped" by two strangers, and the matter was still in dispute and at times threatened to lead to bloodshed.

Bob went on muleback, taking the trail Mark had followed. He rode along as fast as he could and arrived at the settlement about the middle of the afternoon.

"Can you tell me where the doctor's office is?" he asked, of the first man he met.

"Sure I can," was the answer. "See that shack yonder?"

"Yes."

"Well, the doctor lives in the row of houses back of it—the third mansion—name on the door-plate—an' don't stop to ring the bell."

"Thank you."

Bob rode on and soon came to the row of houses mentioned, miserable two-story affairs, built of the roughest kind of boards. In front of one hung a shingle painted white on which was the following, in red:

DOCTOR SAMUEL BARROWS

Office Hours

8 to 11 A. M. 2 to 8 P. M.

The place did not look particularly inviting, but Bob did not hesitate. He tied the mule to a post, walked to the dwelling, and knocked on the door.

"What's wanted?" asked a negro who appeared.

"I want to see the doctor."

"Front room upstairs," and the negro disappeared in the direction of the rear.

Bob entered the narrow and dirty hallway and

ascended the rickety stairs. There were two rooms in the front, on the door of one of which was the sign: Doctor's Office—Walk In.

Bob entered, closing the door after him. A voice from another apartment called out to him:

"Who is there?"

"I came to see the doctor."

"Oh, all right. Sit down, I'll be with you in a few minutes. I am just mixing some medicine I can't leave."

Bob sat down, on the side of the room next to a thin partition which divided that apartment from the other room at the front of the hallway. He could hear a murmur of voices in the next room and presently caught a few words.

"I know we can do it, Fitzsimmons," one man said. "And if we can, look what it means to us."

"Well, I am willing to take chances, Ruff," was the answer. "But we must be sure of that plan to get away."

"That's it," said another voice. "I don't want to run no risk of being caught, and——"

"Don't get scared before you are hurt, Soapy," said one of the other men. "I'll tell you how we can work this." And then the men got closer together and what followed Bob was unable to catch.

The young miner was astonished beyond

measure. He was certain that two of the men in the next room were Sag Ruff and Soapy Gannon, his tool. The other man had been called Fitzsimmons.

"He must be the gambler Mark told about," said Bob to himself. "A fine trio they make! Every one of them ought to be in jail."

He tried his best to catch more of what was said, but a noise on the street made it next to impossible. He heard one man speak of some gold and another of horses, and then mention was made of pistols and the new trail, and that was all, a jumble out of which he could make neither head nor tail.

"They are surely up to no good and ought to be watched," Bob told himself, and then left the vicinity of the partition as the doctor came in.

Doctor Barrows was a man of middle age, tall, dark, and with a heavy beard and black eyes. He listened closely to what Bob had to say.

"Affected by the sun without a doubt," he said. "But he may have something else too. I ought to see him before I prescribe."

"Will you come over to the gulch?"

"It will take two days of my time, and just now my time is rather valuable."

"I know it is, sir, but we are willing to pay what is right."

"I couldn't undertake such a trip for less than a hundred dollars."

"Will you furnish the medicine?"

"Certainly, I'll take my medicine case with me on horseback. You came on horseback, didn't you?"

"I came on my mule. He is just as good as a horse, for mountain climbing!"

"I believe you. Want me to come at once, I presume."

"We can't go till to-morrow very well. The trail isn't safe in the dark."

"All right, we can start first thing in the morning, then. I'll go around and see my present patients to-night. I suppose you know my terms."

"The card on the wall says, Cash in Advance."

"That's it."

"I've got three ounces of dust with me. I'll give you that now and the rest when we reach the gulch. Will that answer?"

"I presume so. You look like an honest young fellow. Who is the sick young man?"

"My chum—one of the best fellows in the world," answered Bob.

Just then another man came in, suffering from a cut on the arm, and the doctor had to attend to

him. Bob went off, promising to be on hand at eight o'clock in the morning.

The talk in the next room had ceased and the youth felt certain that the three men had left the building. While he was in the hallway he approached the door and peeped through the key-hole. The room was empty of occupants.

"Who rents that room next to the doctor's office?" he asked of the negro, whom he met again in the lower hallway.

"Mr. Morgan Fitzsimmons," was the answer.

"Is there a man named Ruff in the building?"

"No, sah."

"Or a man named Soapy Gannon?"

"No, sah."

"You don't know them at all?"

"No, sah," and again the negro went on his way and Bob left the building.

The boy had nothing to do that evening, and after getting a room for the night at the so-styled hotel, another flimsy two-story affair, and stabling for Darling, he obtained supper and then strolled around.

"Bob!" came the cry, as he was suntering down the main street, and the next instant he felt his hand grasped by Josiah Socket, whose tanned face beamed with pleasure.

"How do you do, Mr. Socket?" exclaimed the

boy. "Glad to see you. Where have you been and how are you making it?"

"We are located over to Dishpan Falls," said Josiah Socket, naming a locality which afterwards became known as Felville. "Doing putty good too."

"And how are all the folks?"

"Very well. How are you folks doin'?"

"Very well indeed, that is, so far as gold digging is concerned. But Mark is sick." And Bob gave some particulars.

"I am sorry to hear that," said Josiah Socket. "Hope he pulls through all right. I came here to buy supplies. They are awful high up our way."

"You'll find 'em high here too."

"Yes, so I've learned. But we've got to eat, so I'll make the best of it," added Josiah Socket, with a sigh.

He then related some of the particulars of what he and his family were doing, and he and Bob walked around the settlement, taking in the sights. Bob wanted to see more of Ruff, Gannon, and Fitzsimmons, but could not find them.

"I steer clear o' gambling," said Josiah Socket. "What I find in the way of gold I'm going to keep—outside of what I have to pay for provisions."

"A man is a fool to gamble," answered Bob.

"But more than a quarter of them do it—and they drink too."

He and Josiah Socket slept together that night and parted early in the morning. Then Bob went around for the doctor, and he and the medical man set off for the gulch.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MAYBE DIXON

WHEN the doctor arrived at Mark's side he found the youth in a fever. He at once set to work and administered some medicine, and remained at the sufferer's side part of the night and an hour in the morning.

"I feel quite sure he will get well," he said, when he was ready to leave. "But should he have a turn for the worse you had better come for me again."

He left some pills and several bottles of medicine, and then, having received his pay, rode away. The boys and Maybe Dixon were sorry to see him depart.

"I wish he was stopping in this camp," said Si. "Then he could come around every day."

"Well, he has told us what to do and we'll have to follow directions," answered Bob. "Too bad! After the fine way we were getting along!"

"I shan't complain, if only he pulls through," put in Maybe Dixon.

"He is not going to die—we must pull him through, somehow," said Bob, decidedly.

After that he scarcely left Mark's side for a week. At night Si or Maybe Dixon would relieve him for a few hours, but it was Bob who administered the medicine and tried to make Mark as comfortable as possible.

"I feel just as if Mark was my brother," he said to the others. "I never was so attached to anybody before."

"Well, I feel attached to him myself," said Si. "But then I've got my folks at home, while you have nobody. That makes a great deal of difference."

At the end of the third day came the crisis, and for a few hours it looked as if poor Mark might die. He was totally unconscious and they had to force the medicine down his throat. But the doctor had told them to look for this, so they were not particularly surprised, only worried.

But, the crisis passed, it was wonderful how quickly Mark seemed to rally. He gained strength every hour, and in a few days was able to sit up, take a little food, and do some talking.

"I am awfully glad you are better," said Bob, with a beaming face. "But you must go slow, Mark, or you'll have a relapse. The doctor said so."

"Did I have a doctor?"

"Yes."

"I don't remember it."

"You were pretty far gone when he came. But now be still, and I'll fix you some broth."

As soon as Mark began to mend Si and Maybe Dixon went to work regularly once more. They found no large nuggets, but a good bit of gold in coarse grains, which pleased them not a little.

Maybe Dixon was of a wandering nature and one day announced that he was going up into the mountain back of the gulch, to do a bit of prospecting. He took with him a fair stock of provisions, a pick, and a washing pan, and said he would be back inside of three or four days.

A man from Ohio had drifted into camp, with his wife and daughter. The girl was a likely miss of seventeen, and she readily agreed to play nurse to Mark now that he was on the road to recovery. She also agreed to cook the meals for all hands, for the sum of ten dollars per week—wages that were not considered extra high during those exciting times. She came early in the morning and went away after the supper dishes were put away, and proved a great help to the boys.

"It seems more like home to have a woman around," said Mark. "She is very nice to me, too."

"First thing you know Mark will be falling in love," said Si, with a grin.

"You needn't talk," retorted Bob. "I see you making sheep's eyes at Tillie already."

"Wasn't at all," cried Si, and went off to his work with a very red face. Tillie West was the sort of a farm girl that just suited him. And she liked Si, as everybody could readily see.

Four days came and went and Maybe Dixon did not come back. In the meantime there was great excitement in a neighboring camp. Si brought in the news one night.

"Been some thieves over to Hogan's Flat," he declared. "They cleaned out Hogan's gold, and the gold belonging to a feller named Sanderfield, too."

"Did they get much?" questioned Bob, with interest.

"Dust and nuggets worth about two thousand dollars. They might have got more, only Hogan took some nuggets worth three thousand dollars to Sacramento last week."

"Have they any idea who the thieves are?"

"Not exactly, although they say several suspicious-looking fellows were hanging around the camp some days ago."

"I hope they catch them."

"So do I," came from Mark, who was sitting

up on his couch. "Boys, is our gold safe?" he added, in a lower voice.

"Yes," answered Bob, and glanced at the spot where the precious hoard had been buried.

"We must take some to Sacramento soon and ship it to a safe place," said Si.

"Where to?"

"I'll ship mine home."

"I haven't any home," answered Bob. "And Mark won't want to send it to his step-father."

"You can send it to my father, if you want to. I know he will take good care of it," went on Si.

For the time being nothing was done towards removing the gold. Si and Bob were anxious to see Mark get around once more, and soon they grew anxious to know what had become of Maybe Dixon.

As two days more passed, Si determined to go up in the mountain on a hunt for Dixon.

"He may have fallen over some cliff and been killed," said the former farm lad. "He said he would be back, and as he hasn't come he must be in trouble of some sort."

"Well, you look out that you don't get into trouble," answered Bob.

Si went out on foot, as Maybe Dixon had done, and tramped up the mountain, and along various trails for the best part of the day. Toward night-

fall he met an old prospector who said he had passed Maybe Dixon two days before, bound for the gulch.

"He didn't tell me out and out, but he led me to believe that he had struck a rich find," said the old prospector.

"He didn't come back."

"That's queer. Perhaps he went back, to make sure about the find. Men sometimes do that, you know. They can't believe the evidence of their own senses at first—if the find is a very rich one."

Si did not know what to do. He camped under a tree that night and early in the morning continued his search. Then he reached a spot where somebody had eaten a meal and from the evidences strewn around knew that Maybe Dixon had been there. Footprints led along another trail from this point and he followed, up a hill and then into a patch of forest.

He had not gone far into the forest when he came to a rude shack, in front of which a camp-fire was smoldering. By the side of the camp-fire two men were talking earnestly.

The men were tough characters, as Si could see at a glance. Each wore a pistol in his belt and was attired in a Mexican costume, with cloak and broad-brimmed hat.

"Mexican gold hunters," thought Si, and he was right.

He slipped behind the trees and drew closer. The men were conversing in Spanish, so he did not understand a word of what was said. But once in a while one would point to the shack and tap his pistol significantly.

Had the men appeared more agreeable, the the youth might have shown himself. But their looks were against them and Si had no desire to meet them face to face. He surmised that they could speak little English, and would therefore be unable to answer any question he might put concerning Maybe Dixon.

The Mexicans continued to talk for fully five minutes. Then one slipped into the shack. He came out immediately, and a moment later the two men walked away, up the mountain-side.

Si could not tell why he felt that way, but he had a strong desire to look into the shack, although he was half inclined to believe it was empty. He waited until the two Mexicans were out of sight and then crossed the little opening and peered into the rude building.

At first he could see little or nothing, it was so dark inside. But then he made out the form of a man, lying on his side and breathing heavily.

"Maybe Dixon!" he gasped and bent over the form. "What does this mean?"

The old miner tried to straighten out, and gave a groan. Si then saw that blood was flowing from a cut on the man's forehead and that he had his hands bound behind him and his ankles also fastened together. He got out his jackknife and lost no time in setting Maybe Dixon free.

"Did those Mexicans do this?" he asked.

"Yes," came from Maybe Dixon, in a hoarse whisper. "Si, for the love of heaven, give me some water! I am dying of thirst!"

The boy understood, and running outside he made for the nearest mountain stream and came back with a cup of water. He made three trips before Maybe Dixon's thirst was satisfied. Then he got more water, washed the cut on the forehead, and bound it up with a handkerchief.

"What does this mean?" he asked.

"Are they gone?" asked the old miner.

"Yes."

"How did you get here?"

"I came up on the mountain, looking for you."

"Good boy, Si! Have you a pistol?"

"Yes."

"Let me have it."

"What for?"

"I want to shoot them skunks on sight! They ain't fit to live."

"I don't think they will be back just yet. They went up into the mountain. But what is it all about?"

"I've struck a gold mine about five miles from here—a regular bonanza. Those fellows suspected it and followed me. Then they made me a prisoner and did all they could think of to get my secret away from me," answered Maybe Dixon.

CHAPTER XXVIII

STRIKING A BONANZA

AFTER that the old miner told his story in detail, how he had wandered around the mountain for three days, trying several spots that held out a promise of gold. Some were fair, but the last spot he had visited had every indication of being a bonanza. He had marked it and then come away, thinking to take the news back to camp. On the way he had met an old prospector and had said he had found something quite good. He thought the old prospector, who could talk Spanish, must have told the two Mexicans. The Mexicans were nothing but brigands, and they had followed and waylaid him and dragged him to the shack. There they had tried by every means in their power to make Maybe Dixon reveal his secret, starving him and giving him no water, and hitting him with their pistols.

"The last thing they did was to promise to bring a rattlesnake to the shack. Then, if I didn't

promise to lead them to the find, they would let the rattler bite me."

"What awful wretches!" gasped Si. "No wonder you feel like shooting them on sight."

As soon as Maybe Dixon felt strong enough, they left the shack. Scarcely had they gotten outside than Si gave a cry:

"There they are now!"

"Where?"

"Up on yonder rocks!"

Maybe Dixon looked in the direction, and catching sight of one of the Mexicans fired the pistol at him. At once the man and his companion fired in return and then disappeared up the mountain trail, running as hard as they could.

"They won't come back now," said Si, after the momentary excitement was over. None of the shots had taken effect.

"They had better not," answered Maybe Dixon. "I am going armed after this, every day, so they had better beware."

Dixon was so weak that the two had to take their time about returning to the gulch. The want of water had almost driven him crazy, and he was more than bitter against the Mexicans every time he thought of them.

"I couldn't have held out much longer," he

said. "I would have had to give in, if you hadn't 'a' come along."

"I am mighty glad I did," answered Si. "But I guess those greasers will be mad at me now too."

"Yes, you watch out that you don't git into trouble. Don't trust 'em an inch."

"I won't."

The return to camp was hailed with delight by Bob and Mark, who listened in amazement to the tale the old miner had to tell. They all agreed that they must go armed in the future, and two good pistols were purchased without delay. More than this, the boys spent some time in shooting at a mark, doing very well after a little practice.

"After this we'll have to go on the principle that every man is an enemy until he proves himself a friend," said Bob. "It's a hard way to do, but it can't be helped."

As soon as Mark felt strong enough for the journey, they moved their camp up the mountain-side. Tillie West went with them, and so did her father and mother and two miners named Dawson and Keith. The boys and Maybe Dixon were glad to have the others in the colony, as it would have been lonely otherwise. Besides, Si wanted Tillie to go along, and the young house-

keeper would not go without her father and mother.

It was a clear and rather cool, breezy day when Maybe Dixon led the boys to the new diggings and staked out his claim. Mr. West staked a claim close by, and the other miners did the same. Then all began to work, anxious to see what the "bonanza," as Maybe Dixon termed it, would bring forth.

The spot was between two hills of rocks and dirt. There had once been a stream there, but this had long since dried up. The place had a low growth of bushes which were cleared away after some labor. It was not long after this that they got down to pay dirt.

"Ten dollars at least to a panful," announced Maybe Dixon. "Ain't that rich?"

"It's fine!" declared Mark, who was looking on. He did not feel strong enough as yet to go to work.

The others were more than satisfied, especially as some small nuggets were found, and all went to work with a will. The claims of the other miners were also satisfactory, and soon more men drifted to the spot until the colony numbered a score or more. It was called the Maybe Hill settlement, after Maybe Dixon, much to that individual's satisfaction.

"Never thought as how I'd have a village named after me," said he. "Hope she proves a buster."

"It looks as if she might," answered Bob, with a laugh.

A week passed and Mark grew steadily stronger. He wanted to go to work again, but the others thought he had best wait a few days longer.

"You don't want a relapse," said Bob. "It might prove worse than the original attack."

As they would not let him work, Mark spent the time in roaming around the mountain-side, looking at the various diggings and prospects. He kept his eyes wide open for the two villainous Mexicans, but they did not appear.

Since his sickness Mark had asked several times about Morgan Fitzsimmons, Sag Ruff, and Soapy Gannon. Then Si went to the settlement for a new pick and a washing pan and came back with the announcement that the three men had left for parts unknown.

"They were wanted too—by some men who were swindled at cards—but nobody knew when they got out, or how," said Si.

Mark had written a long letter to his stepfather, explaining the situation. The letter was sent to San Francisco, but there was no telling

when it would get to Philadelphia or when an answer could be expected.

On the second day of his journeying around the mountain Mark came to a particularly deep gully, located at the bottom of what had once been a landslide. Great rocks were on both sides of the opening and also the remains of some large trees.

"There may be gold down here," thought the youth, and resolved to investigate. It was no easy matter to reach the bottom of the gully, and he had to make use of a rope for that purpose. Then traveling along the bottom of the opening proved laborious and his progress was necessarily slow.

Mark had been hunting around a good two hours when he came to a spot where a large and somewhat flat rock had blocked a portion of the landslide. Under the flat rock was an opening several feet wide and almost as high as his head. How deep it was he could not tell from the outside.

His curiosity was excited, and he lit a bit of tallow candle he carried and walked into the opening a distance of several yards. It was smaller inside and he had to walk along with bent head. Then he came to where several sharp rocks stuck out in a semicircle, with a good deal of sand and dirt underneath.

He placed his candle on a rock and began to examine the interior of the cavern. The sand looked as if it contained gold, and he took some in his hand and held it close to the light.

"Gold, beyond a doubt!" he murmured. "This spot ought to pay very well. It may be every bit as good as the spot the others are now working. No use of talking, California is certainly the land of gold!"

He continued to hunt around the cavern, finding evidences of loose gold on all sides of him. Then, with a small crowbar he was carrying, he pried up several of the rocks, taking care not to disturb any which might bring the roof down on his head.

One rock in particular was hard to move, but Mark kept at it, and presently it fell away, revealing a dark pocket several feet in depth. The young gold hunter took his candle and held it down in front of him.

"Eureka!"

Mark gasped out the word, as a dull, yellowish lump lying on some sand below caught his eye. His hand began to tremble so that he let the tallow candle fall into the hole. It went out, leaving him in darkness.

"A nugget, I'll wager my head!" he murmured and reached down into the hole. Soon he had

hold of the lump and with an effort he raised it up and placed it on the floor of the cavern. Then he took it in both hands and stumbled to the outer air with his find.

The sight before him almost took away his breath. He held in his hand a nugget that was almost pure gold. It was of good size and heavy, and he knew it must be worth at least five thousand dollars, if not much more!

CHAPTER XXIX

A FORTUNE IN NUGGETS

MARK continued to look at the nugget with great interest. It was the largest find made in that territory and his joy knew no bounds.

"Perhaps there are more of them," he told himself. "If so, our fortunes are made."

At last he placed the nugget on one side of the cavern and felt down in the hole for what was left of the candle. It was only a tiny mite, and before he could do more than take a second look at the hole it went out, leaving nothing but a patch of grease behind.

"Never mind, we can come up to-morrow and investigate," said Mark to himself. "But I'd better take that nugget with me."

He walked outside once more and placed the nugget near a fallen tree. Then he set up a stick at one side of the opening and another stick on the opposite side, that he might mark the locality. This done, he took a good look around, to fix "the lay of the land" in his head.

"I mustn't lose this spot as Jacobs lost his mine," he told himself. He referred to a Jew named Moses Jacobs, who told a story of finding a wonderfully rich mine and then losing it. This mine was relocated some years later and proved to be of good value, but poor Jacobs never got anything out of it.

As Mark's gaze swept the horizon he started, for up on the mountain-side he discerned two men, both looking down upon him. They were the two rascally Mexicans, he felt sure, for each wore the bright-colored cloak and the wide-brimmed, sharp-pointed hat which Si and Maybe Dixon had described.

The boy was startled and looked eagerly at the nugget of gold, which was hidden by the tree limbs. Had the Mexicans seen him handling that precious bit of metal? If so, would they try to rob him of it?

The cold perspiration stood out on Mark's forehead. He felt in his belt and satisfied himself that his pistol was there, ready for use.

"They shan't rob me of it—I'll fight first!" he told himself, and set his teeth hard. Then he began to climb out of the gully, supporting the precious nugget under his shirt, next to his belt.

To his alarm the Mexicans walked toward him and one of them called out something in Spanish

which he did not understand. He shook his head and continued to walk on, getting as far from them as possible. But they continued to come after him.

There was a patch of timber a few rods away, and toward this went Mark, leaving the regular trail and taking to a smaller one made by mountain deer.

As soon as he gained the timber he broke into a run, and kept this up until he was all but exhausted. Then he came out at a spot directly above the camp and shouted loudly to Bob and Si, who chanced to be working within hearing distance.

"What's up, Mark?" yelled back Bob.

"I want help. Come up, and call Maybe Dixon."

The old miner was not far away, and soon the two boys and the man climbed up to where Mark sat on a rock, panting heavily.

"What's the trouble?" asked Maybe Dixon. "Wild animals or Injuns?"

"Those two Mexicans!" gasped the exhausted youth. "They were after me! I think they wanted to rob me!"

"The skunks!" roared the old miner. "Where are they now?"

"I don't know."

to say next, or what to do. Then Mark gave a start.

"We are forgetting poor Si!" he cried. "We must try to find him. Perhaps he is in trouble and needs help."

"That is true," answered Bob. "Let us go down to the bottom of the landslide."

"But our gold?" demanded Maybe Dixon. "What of the rascals who took it?"

"We can follow them up afterwards—if we can find the trail."

"Supposing I hunt for the trail while you look for Si? It won't take all three of us to look for the boy."

The others were willing, and soon Mark and Bob were on their way down the mountain, following the direction the slide had taken. The way was rough and uncertain. Trees often barred their progress, and they had to pick their way around loose rocks with care.

"Take care that you don't take a tumble," cautioned the former sailor boy. "We can't afford it."

A tree was in front of them and they were on the point of going around it when they heard a faint cry. There lay poor Si, caught fast between two heavy branches.

"Oh, I was afraid you were all dead!" said the

former farm lad. "Didn't the landslide cover you up?"

"Yes, but we dug our way out," answered Mark. "Are you hurt?"

"I think my shoulder is bruised, that is all. But the shock stunned me and I only came to my senses a little while ago. Can you get me out of this trap?"

"To be sure we can," cried Bob, and he and Mark set to work immediately. It was no easy task, but was finally accomplished, much to Si's satisfaction.

"By the way, I saw those Mexicans again," said Si, as he nursed his bruised shoulder. "I caught sight of 'em just before the landslide came. They were near the top of the mountain."

"My gracious, I wonder if they started that landslide!" gasped Mark.

"It would be nothing to wonder at," answered Bob.

"They ought to be hanged for it if they did," put in Si.

"Our gold is gone," explained Mark. "Somebody dug it up and made off with it."

"Oh!" gasped the former farm boy, and a look of real agony crossed his face. "You don't mean it!"

"It is true," said Bob. "Maybe Dixon is trying to find the trail of the thieves."

Now that Si was found the boys could think of nothing but the loss of the gold. It was such a crushing blow it made them heartsick.

"All of our hard work gone for nothing," groaned Si. "And we may never make such a rich find again!"

"We must locate those greasers," said Bob. "They must be the guilty ones."

"With somebody to help them," said Mark. "I don't think they did the job alone."

"I am going to get into one of the trees and look around," said Bob, and began to climb the tree without delay, Mark giving him a boost up.

At first Bob could see nothing out of the ordinary. Then he discovered Maybe Dixon coming toward the camp slowly and dejectedly.

"I see Maybe," he called out. "He looks as if he hadn't found anything."

Bob continued to look around the mountain and then glanced down to the foot of the landslide. He saw a man limping along. A moment later the man sank down in some bushes as if exhausted.

"I see a stranger!" he called out. "He is down below us."

"One of the greasers?" questioned Mark.

"No, he is dressed in ordinary store clothes."

"Let us go down at once and see who it is," cried Si.

The others were willing, and as soon as Bob had descended from the tree they set out. They found the man on his side in the bushes, breathing heavily.

"Soapy Gannon!" burst out Mark. "Sag Ruff's crony!"

Soapy Gannon was in a bad way. The landslide had sprained one of his ankles, and in a roll down the mountain-side he had had a rib broken and received a severe cut along his left cheek. He was covered with blood and very weak.

"What brings you here?" demanded Mark.

"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" whined the sufferer. "I ain't done nuthin!"

"How did you get here?"

"The landslide brought me down. Oh, how my chest hurts!" Soapy Gannon gave a gasp. "Got some liquor with you?"

"No," said Bob. He knelt by the man's side. "Soapy Gannon, I want you to answer some questions."

"I didn't do anything, I tell you!" whined the man. "The landslide came and took me down, as you can see."

"Were you up at our tent?"

"No! no! I wasn't within quarter of a mile of your camp."

"But somebody was," said Mark. "Who was it? Answer at once!" And he made a move as if to draw his pistol.

"Don't shoot me!"

"Then tell me what you know—and be quick about it."

"The greasers got up the plot—they said you had a lot of nuggets and dust stowed away in a hole in your tent. One of 'em, a fellow named Gomez, knew Sag Ruff and another gambler named Morgan Fitzsimmons. They all got in the game together."

"The two greasers, Sag Ruff, Morgan Fitzsimmons, and yourself," cried Mark. He saw a flood of light ahead.

"I was only a hanger-on," whined the man. "I didn't want to go into the game at all. The greasers plotted to shut you up in the cave, but the landslide was bigger than they calculated on. I got caught in it, and that's the last I know of until I found myself here, knocked out."

"They stole our gold," said Bob.

"Got it, did they? I was thinkin' they might. Oh, how I suffer! Can't you do something for me—now I've given you the story straight?" said Gannon.

"Did they say where they would go, if they got the gold?"

"The greasers have a hiding place beyond the mountain—at a spot called Five Falls. They were going there to divide the spoils and then each man was to go his own way."

"Five Falls," repeated Si. "I have heard of such a place, but I don't know exactly where it is."

"Didn't Mr. West speak of it?" asked Bob.

"Yes!" shouted Si. "I remember now. He went over there prospecting."

"Then he must know how to reach it," put in Mark.

"Shall I go after him?"

"Perhaps it would be best. But we can speak to Maybe Dixon first. He may have some clew."

They could do little for Soapy Gannon but give him a drink and bind up the wound on his face. But they promised to come back later on, for which he was thankful.

"I've got my fill of Sag Ruff," said the sufferer. "Instead of coming to help me he went after that gold. I suppose he thinks if I'm dead he can have so much more of the plunder."

"Well, if you'll agree to testify against those men—providing we can capture them—I'll do what I can for you," said Mark, and Bob and Si said the same.

"All right, it's a go," gasped Soapy Gannon, and then became silent, for it hurt him greatly to talk.

As tired as they were, the three boys hurried back to what was left of the camp. Maybe Dixon came forward to meet them.

"Glad to know you are all right," he said to Si.

"Have you any news?" asked Bob.

"No," and the old miner looked much discouraged.

"We have," went on the former sailor lad.

The face of Maybe Dixon brightened considerably when he heard the news they had to tell.

"I'll go after Andy West myself," he said.

"I'll get some of the other men to help us too. That gang has either got to be captured or wiped out."

As late as it was he set off to the gulch settlement, going down on muleback. He rode with all possible speed, and burst in on the West family as they were sitting down to supper.

"I want you to take us over to Five Falls at once," he said to Mr. West.

"What's up?" asked Andrew West in astonishment.

"We have been robbed and the thieves have gone to that place, so we have learned. Can you show us where it is?"

"Certainly."

"I want some men to go along. Is Jackson here?"

"I think so."

Maybe Dixon then told how the camp had been robbed of all the four partners possessed. To make it worth while, he said he would give Andrew West five ounces of gold dust if the stolen gold was recovered, and later on promised two ounces each to four other men who said they would go along to help round up the thieves.

"I don't want any reward," said Andrew West. "We must stand together when thieves are around. I'll do my best for you."

It was midnight when the posse left the gulch and two o'clock in the morning when they joined Mark, Si, and Bob. Everybody was fully armed. They went on foot, since to travel to Five Falls in any other manner was impossible.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TRAIL OF THE GOLD THIEVES

As he was the only one who knew the route, Andrew West took the lead, the others following in Indian file. It was a fairly clear night, with numerous stars twinkling in the sky overhead. All was quiet, save for the distant rush of some mountain torrent over the rocks.

"I hope we are not too late," said Mark to Bob. "I don't want to lose all that gold."

"Nor I. But I don't think they'll hurry—unless they suspect that we have discovered the truth."

"Oh, they won't let the grass grow under their feet," put in Si. "They know what it means out here to be caught stealing."

The route lay down the opposite side of the mountain and then along a watercourse lined on one side with rocks and on the other with a patch of spare timber. Not a camp of any kind was in sight, for nothing in the way of gold had been discovered in that vicinity.

As the party moved forward, Maybe Dixon told a good part of his story, to which Mr. West and the other men listened with interest. He did not tell what the stolen gold was worth, but said it was "considerable," and the others understood.

"It is funny the greasers didn't try to get the gold alone," said one man.

"They didn't have spunk enough," answered another. "Behind it all, they are very cowardly. They went after Mark because he was a boy and thought they could get the nugget away from him with ease."

The journey to Five Falls took the best part of three hours and at its end Mark, who had not yet fully recovered from his sickness, was ready to drop from weariness. But he did not complain, for he realized how much was at stake.

"Can you go on?" asked Bob, who saw him falter a little.

"Yes, Bob, I am going on."

"It's rather tough on you. Why don't you let us go ahead alone?"

"No, I want to see the finish of this affair."

Five Falls was a narrow gorge between two hills of good size. Here the water of the river tumbled over a series of rocks, making a most picturesque bit of scenery. One of the hills was covered with low bushes, the other with a sweep

of tall timber, including some trees of remarkable size.

"Well, here we are," declared Andrew West, as he came to a halt beside the falls. He spoke in a low tone, knowing that they must be cautious.

All in the party looked around. Nothing out of the ordinary was in sight.

"Let us divide into two parties," suggested Maybe Dixon. "One can take to one side o' the stream and one to tudder. If them rascals came up here they must be somewhere about."

The posse was divided as suggested. Mark, Bob, and Andrew West remained where they were while the others crossed the gorge, leaping from rock to rock where the falls were. Then all began to journey up the gorge.

"Wait! I see a light!" whispered Bob, presently. He pointed among the trees, some distance ahead.

"I see it too," declared Mark. "It must be a camp of some kind."

A low whistle was given—a signal that something had been discovered. At once Maybe Dixon's party halted and the old miner came to the edge of the gorge.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A light ahead. Must be a camp of some sort."

"Good enough! Go ahead, and we'll come over as soon as we can."

Andrew West, Mark, and Bob increased their speed, and soon came in sight of a rude shack, from the open doorway of which the light was streaming. They could see several men moving around.

"I'll wager those are the thieves!" exclaimed Bob. "Don't you see the tall hat of one of the Mexicans?"

He had scarcely spoken when a pistol shot rang out on the still air. It came from a point some distance in front of the shack. Then they saw a man run from some bushes towards the rear of the building.

"Did he shoot at us?" asked Mark.

"No, I fancy that was a signal," answered Andrew West. "They have spotted us and are going to try to get away!"

He was right, one of the Mexicans had been on guard. Now he ran back of the shack, to where several horses were tied.

"A posse is coming," he cried, to the other Mexican. "They are on both sides of the river. We must ride for it if we would get away!"

Sag Ruff and Morgan Fitzsimmons were looking over the stolen nuggets at the time—trying to decide how they might be divided. The swindler

from the South understood Spanish and gave a start.

"What did he say?" asked Fitzsimmons.

"A posse is already after us. We'll have to get out," ejaculated Sag Ruff.

"So soon?"

"Yes, although that seems impossible." Sag Ruff swept the nuggets into a bag. "Come on."

They ran outside. The Mexican who had given the alarm was already coming around with the horses. He pointed down the gorge.

"I see them!" cried Sag Ruff.

"There are others, too,—on the other side!" gasped Morgan Fitzsimmons. "How in the world did they get here so quickly?"

"Something must have gone wrong," answered Sag Ruff. "Maybe they got out of that landslide in time to see us go away in this direction. But, no matter how it is, we have got to ride for it now, and ride hard!"

The men were soon in the saddle. The light was put out, and they started along a trail leading through the thick timber.

"Stop!" cried Bob. "Stop, or we'll fire on you!"

The rascals paid no attention. Then Bob fired, and so did Mark and Andrew West. In the

meantime the others of the party were scrambling over the river as best they could.

The thieves did not take the time to fire back. None of them was hit, and soon a turn of the trail took them out of sight.

"Come on after them!" cried Si, as soon as he was across the stream. "Come on—we must catch them!"

"I don't see how we are going to follow on foot," sighed Maybe Dixon. "A man can't run against a hoss, nohow."

"He can if the trail isn't very good," insisted the former farm boy. "They may not know the way very well and get mixed up in the dark. I don't believe in standing still and doing nothing," he added, pleadingly.

"Neither do I," returned Bob. "Come, let's go ahead."

It was decided to follow the trail with all the speed possible. They covered a distance of several hundred feet when Maybe Dixon set up a shout:

"A hoss! A hoss!"

He was right, a horse was close by, in the timber, panting violently. He had a halter dangling from his head, showing that he had broken away in some manner.

"I thought they had an extra hoss with them

when they rode off," said Andrew West. "This must be the animal."

"Perhaps it's a horse intended for Soapy Gannon," suggested Si, and struck the truth of the matter. The steed had gotten away from one of the Mexicans and the rascal had been afraid to lose the time necessary to catch him.

"I'll use that hoss an' go after them hot-footed," declared Maybe Dixon, as he captured the animal and swung up in the saddle. "If I can't bring 'em to terms I'll keep my eye on 'em until you come up."

"But they may travel for miles," said Mark.

"I'll fix it so you can follow me," said Maybe Dixon. "Hand me one of them flowering bushes."

The bush in question was of good size and covered with bright yellow flowers. The old miner tucked it in behind him.

"I'll drop a flower now and then," he said. "That will be easy to see." And then he rode off after the evil-doers, and was soon out of sight.

It was now growing light in the east, and soon day was at hand. The whole party marched on steadily, Mark being the only one to drag behind. Fortunately one man had thought to bring some rations along, and these were divided evenly all around. They washed the food down with a

drink at a spring and kept on until noon. They were now away from the big hill and traveling towards a series of rocks backed up by tall cliffs.

"Hullo, here is a mining camp!" cried Bob, as they came to a turn in the trail.

"And horses!" ejaculated Si, as he caught sight of a number of animals.

The miners in the camp were just stirring. They had not seen the gold thieves but had talked to Maybe Dixon, who had asked them for the loan of their steeds, for the benefit of his friends. The miners were willing enough to let their horses go on a mission of justice, and soon Mark, Si, Bob, and all of the others were in the saddle.

"I am more than thankful for this," said Mark. "I couldn't have gone another step, try my best."

At the camp they procured some provisions, not knowing how long the chase might continue. With them went two of the miners, one of whom had been an under-sheriff in Missouri.

"We'll bring them to justice if it can be done," said this man, whose name was Peckham.

Maybe Dixon had evidently gotten a fresh supply of yellow flowers, for the trail was strewn thickly with them, so it could be followed with ease. It led through the upper end of the mining camp and then over the rocks and along the bottom of the series of cliffs just mentioned.

"Did you have much with you?" questioned Bob.

"Take me to the tent and I'll show you what I have."

"Make a find?" queried Si, eagerly.

"Yes."

The three others helped Mark down the mountain-side and into the tent. Tillie had gone to her father's camp, so the partners were alone.

"What do you think of this?" asked Mark, as he drew forth the big nugget with much pride.

"Phew!" whistled Bob.

"What a whopper!" came from Si.

"The best yet—by a good deal," murmured Maybe Dixon, his eyes glistening.

"I reckon it is worth at least five thousand dollars," said Mark, in a low voice.

"Every bit of it, lad, and most likely six or seven," answered the old miner. "Where did you get it?"

Sitting close to his friends, so that nobody outside might hear, Mark told his tale, to which the others listened with breathless interest. When he mentioned the cave Bob's eyes opened widely.

"Maybe it is filled with nuggets," said he.

"Maybe," put in Maybe Dixon, quickly. "Anyway, we ought to stake a claim."

"Exactly what I think—and the sooner the bet-

ter," came from Si. "If we don't, those greasers may get some friends to step in for them and do the trick."

"Those rascals won't dare to show themselves," said Maybe Dixon. "But, as Si says, they may get somebody else to stake a claim for a share of the findings."

"I move we stake a claim this very night," said Bob. "There is no use of waiting."

His opinion was the opinion of all. The question was, Could Mark find the spot in the dark, and was he strong enough to make the journey?

"I think I can make it if you go slow," said the youth. "But about finding the place, that is another question. I can't, if it is too dark."

"But we can get close to it," said Bob, "and then stake a claim as soon as it gets light enough."

An hour later they were ready to leave. The nugget was hidden in a hollow behind some bushes, they not wishing to take the time to bury it, and tying up the tent they set off. They carried with them a pick, shovel, and washing pan, besides candles, a lantern, matches, and some few provisions. Each went armed, with the weapons ready for immediate use.

The way was a long one to Mark, and the others had frequently to aid him up the rocks and

across dangerous pitfalls. Once Si was in danger of going over a cliff, but Bob and Maybe Dixon caught him in the nick of time.

"Gosh!" spluttered the former farm lad. "Guess that was a narrow shave for me!"

"Be careful," warned the old miner. "We don't want to lose a life for all the nuggets in these mountains."

Unfortunately, it was dark and there were some signs of a coming storm. They kept on steadily for about an hour, when Mark called a halt.

"It's no use," he said. "I can't see the way. We'll have to camp somewhere until morning."

They found a small shelter under some overhanging rocks and there proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted. They cut down some small pines and used the boughs as bedding and made a campfire of the trunks. Mark was glad enough to lie down and was soon in the land of dreams, and one after another the others followed his example.

When they awoke in the morning, there was a heavy mist on the mountain, so that they could not see a hundred feet in any direction.

"This is the worst yet," grumbled Bob. He was wild with excitement to reach the cavern and explore it thoroughly. The others were in a similar condition of mind. For all they knew

there might be more big nuggets there awaiting them.

They had to remain where they were until about eleven o'clock. Then a slight wind sprang up and the mist was driven away as if by magic. By noon the sun was out as strong as ever.

Mark took a careful survey of the mountain and then located the spot where the cavern was, and all set out once more. They had to walk around two deep gullies and climb some extra-slippery rocks, but at last reached the landslide.

"There are my sticks and there is the cavern," said Mark.

"Hurrah!" shouted Bob, enthusiastically. "Now for more big nuggets!"

"Don't be too sure," warned Maybe Dixon. "Maybe there ain't another nugget near the spot."

"Oh, there must be!" cried Si. "It's just the place for 'em!"

They got down the landslide in short order and hurried to the cavern. Then the lantern was lit, and also two candles, and they walked inside.

A brief glance around showed Mark that everything was as he had left it. Without delay, Maybe Dixon sank his pick deep in the ground and his shovel followed.

"In the name of us four partners I stake this

claim!" he cried. "Now let them greasers or their friends come on if they dare!"

"But we must set out regular stakes, if the spot is any good," said Bob.

"Right you are, lad, but we'll take a look around first."

Si was already at work and the others soon followed. They scooped a large quantity of sand from the hole at the back of the cavern and then dislodged several small rocks.

"Look! look!" cried Bob, presently, and brought up a nugget half the size of the one found by Mark. "There's a couple of thousand dollars for you!"

"And here is another!" came from Si, bringing up a lump equally large.

"And two more," added Maybe Dixon, holding them up. "Boys, this is the banner find of this district!"

"We'll be rich!" cried Mark. "We'll be rich! Oh, but ain't I glad!"

They continued to dig and scrape away in feverish haste and soon brought to light half a dozen small nuggets. Then they reached another pocket, filled with sand and coarse gold grains.

"The richest kind of washing," said Maybe Dixon.

"Oh, we can't stop to wash now!" cried Si. "Let us look for nuggets!" And they continued to labor, harder than ever.

By nightfall they were completely exhausted, but supremely happy. They had unearthed twenty-four nuggets of various sizes and shapes. Maybe Dixon surveyed each with care and counted up the probable value.

"I can't strike it very close," said he. "Fer we don't know the quality of 'em. But I should say we had all of thirty thousand dollars' worth o' gold here. And more'n likely that sand will pan out ten thousand dollars' worth more."

"Forty thousand dollars!" gasped Si. "We'll surely be rich now! Oh, what will my folks say when they hear of this!"

CHAPTER XXX

THE LANDSLIDE

THEY scarcely knew what to do with their treasure. The nuggets were heavy, so it would be no easy matter to move them from one place to another.

"I think the best we can do for the present is to bury them," said Maybe Dixon.

"We'll have to move up here," returned Mark.

"To be sure—and bring our other gold up too. We can't be at two claims at once."

So it was decided, and early on the following morning the three boys went back to the old camp and prepared to move.

"Going to quit, eh?" said Mr. West.

"We are going up in the mountain," answered Bob. "I don't suppose Tillie will want to go along."

"No, her mother isn't feeling well and she will have to stay at our place now. I came over to tell you."

"Tell her I am sorry," said Si. "I am coming down to see you folks some day."

"Si is surely smitten on Tillie," whispered Bob to Mark.

"Well, she is certainly a good girl and will make somebody a good wife," answered Mark.

The three boys could scarcely realize their good fortune. With the gold previously found the four partners were now worth all of fifty thousand dollars.

"That's twelve thousand apiece and two thousand left over for expenses," said Si. "Why, my father was never worth so much in his whole life!"

"Nor mine," added Bob. "I am mighty glad I gave up whaling and took to gold hunting, I can tell you!"

"We haven't got to the end of it yet," added Mark. "That cavern may prove to be more than a bonanza. We must be careful how we stake out our claim."

It was nightfall by the time they reached the cavern once more. They brought Darling with them and all of their possessions. It was no new thing for gold hunters to leave a camp suddenly, so their departure from the gulch created no surprise.

"Got tired of stayin' here, I suppose," said one

old miner. "Wall, I'm gittin' a leetle tired o' it myself."

It was decided to establish a camp to the north of the landslide, a distance of four hundred feet from the cavern. Here was a pleasant patch of timber and a spring of clear mountain water. They soon had the tent raised, and Si and Bob built a rude cooking place of stones. Then they cut some firewood, and sat down to the best meal they had had in two days.

"We can afford a spread, after the find we have made," said Mark.

It was decided to bury their nuggets and gold dust at the rear of the tent. An extra deep hole was made, and they covered it with a flat stone and over it placed a bit of a tree trunk that did for a bench.

"Fifty thousand dollars in that hole," said Si. "We want to watch it."

"We can see the tent from the cave," said Maybe Dixon. "So it will be an easy matter to keep an eye that way while we are working."

Maybe Dixon had found two small nuggets worth at least a hundred dollars each. He had also washed out some of the sand and gotten several ounces of almost pure gold. Everything on hand went into the hole before it was filled up with dirt and covered with the tree trunk.

Sunday passed, and then they went at the cavern work in earnest. They cleaned out a place at the rear several yards in extent. Here they found a big slit, extending upward, but the rocks were exceedingly hard to remove.

"We ought to have some powder to blow them apart," said Mark.

"We must be careful," said Maybe Dixon. "We don't want a cave-in."

By the middle of the week they had twelve more nuggets and another small bag of dust.

"Ten thousand dollars' worth more," said Bob, when the find was placed in "the bank," as the hole had been designated. "We are getting wealthy, sure!"

Thursday found them all at the cavern, working away as industriously as ever. It was the middle of the forenoon and each had found a small nugget. In the center of the cavern floor was a heap of sand filled with golden grains, waiting to be washed. They were all happy and Bob was whistling merrily.

"Guess I'll go out and take a look around," said Si, and started for the opening.

Mark, Bob, and Maybe Dixon were at the rear of the cavern, working around a sharp, triangular rock. They imagined some more nuggets might be underneath.

"Hark!" cried Mark, suddenly. "What's that?"

All stopped work and listened. There was a strange rumble overhead. It kept growing louder and louder.

"Look out for the landslide!" yelled Si, rushing into the open air. "Come out, or you'll be buried alive!"

The others heard the warning and started to leap from the hollow where they were working. But before they could do so the rumble burst forth like thunder, all but deafening them. Then down came some sand and small stones, all but burying the three. The mouth of the cavern was darkened, as a mass of dirt and rocks blocked it up completely.

"We are shut in!" spluttered Bob, as soon as he could speak.

The rumble stopped, but soon it started again, as another mass of dirt slid down the mountain-side, directly over the cavern. Then came a quiver as of an earthquake, and absolute quietness followed.

"Boys, are you hurt?" The question came from Maybe Dixon. He was up to his knees in loose dirt.

"I am all right," answered Mark.

"A small rock hit me on the shoulder, but the

hurt doesn't count," returned Bob. "Where is Si?"

"I think he got out," said Mark. "But I am not certain."

"If he did get out maybe he is worse off than we are," said Maybe Dixon. "The landslide must have carried him down to the valley, or killed him."

For several minutes the three inside the cavern did not know what to do.

"One thing is certain," said Mark. "If we don't want to be smothered we'll have to dig our way out."

"True, but we don't want to risk a cave-in," said Maybe Dixon. "We'll have to go at it easy-like."

The candles had gone out, but the lantern was still lit, and holding this up they made an examination of the cavern. The front was blocked up so completely that the shovel did not pass through it.

"I think we had better cut upward," said Maybe Dixon. "But be mighty careful."

They set to work, slowly and cautiously. The dirt was hard and mixed with stones, and sometimes a shower came down on their heads. What fell was banked up for a place to stand upon while going higher.

An hour passed and the air in the cavern began to grow foul. Mark was the first to notice this.

"We ought to have ventilation," he remarked.

"This makes me sleepy," said Bob.

"Don't go to sleep, or you'll never wake up!" cried the old miner. "Keep at the work and we'll be sure to git out sooner or later."

Another hour passed and the air became so bad they could hardly breathe. They were all thirsty, but no water was at hand. They looked at each other in despair.

"We have got to get out!" said Mark, determinedly. "Come on, don't give up yet."

Growing desperate, they attacked the top of the cavern with vigor, letting the dirt and stones fall all around them. Then down came a big rock, just grazing Bob's head.

"I'm glad it didn't land on my head," said the boy, after leaping to one side.

"I see a streak of light!" ejaculated Mark and pointed upward.

The light was there, a single ray of sunshine, coming from a slit in the rocks. Mark sniffed the air.

"That is better, anyhow," said he. "With that opening we shan't smother to death."

They had now to work with greater care than ever, piling up the rocks around them, as a sup-

port for what was left of the roof of the cavern. But their labors told, and inside of another hour Mark was able to stand on Maybe Dixon's shoulders and drag himself up out of the cave to a shelving rock which kept the rest of the cavern roof from caving in. Then Bob came up, after which the two youths hauled the old miner up by means of the pick handle and a short rope that was handy.

"Thank heaven we are out of that!" said Mark, sincerely.

"We must look for Si," came from Bob. "Si! Si!" he called out. "Where are you?"

No answer came back. Then they looked toward the spot where the tent had been. The shelter was knocked flat, but otherwise the landslide had apparently done little damage in that direction.

"Let us go over to the tent," said Bob. "I am dying for a drink of water. Then we can look for poor Si."

They got out of the dirt and loose rocks as best they could and walked over to the fallen tent. Some round rocks were lying about and one had sent the tree trunk rolling down the hill, thus bringing down the canvas.

"The hole!" yelled Maybe Dixon, suddenly. "The hole! Somebody has dug up our gold!"

He pointed to the hole, and they all ran in that direction. The dirt was scattered in all directions and near at hand lay a pick and two shovels.

"It's empty!" muttered Mark, hoarsely.

"Empty?" echoed Bob, faintly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, every one of our nuggets is gone and the gold dust, too!"

CHAPTER XXXI

A CRUSHING LOSS

FOR a moment or two the three could not realize the truth of the crushing discovery which they had made. The precious gold dust and the nuggets were gone—not a grain of their wealth remained. It was too awful to be true.

“Gone!” gasped Maybe Dixon, and staggered to a rock and dropped down. “Who did this?” He leaped up, a cold glitter in his eyes. “Show me the rascal and I’ll kill him on the spot!”

“More than one rascal did this,” said Mark, pointing to the pick and shovels. “Looks like three to me.”

“And they worked fast too,” came from Bob. “They just threw the dirt any way, so as to get to the bottom of the hole.”

“They must have been watching us,” went on Mark. “As soon as the landslide came they took advantage of it.”

There followed a silence, nobody knowing what

"This is certainly proving a long chase," said Andrew West, after several miles had been covered.

"The rascals will have to rest some time," answered Mark. "Their horses will give out. Luckily ours are fresh."

They kept on, and towards evening came to a spot where the cliffs were particularly rugged. They could see a long distance ahead and made out a figure on horseback, waving a hand in the air.

"It's Maybe Dixon!" cried Si.

"Perhaps he has lost the trail," came from Mark.

"Oh, don't say that," came from Bob, in fresh alarm. "They couldn't throw him as easily as all that."

As soon as he knew he was seen, Maybe Dixon rode his horse to a slight depression between the rocks, where he waited for the posse to come up. He was tired out, but his leathery face wore something of a smile.

"Where are they?" demanded Mark.

"Over yonder, in a cave," was the answer, and the old miner pointed out the place with his hand.

"You saw them go in?" queried Bob.

"I did, hosses an' all."

"Has the cave a back opening?" questioned Si, quickly.

"I don't think so, although I am not sartin."

"We'll soon make sure," put in Andrew West. "I'll ride up on top of the cliffs and some of you can go with me."

"I'll go," said Bob, promptly.

"So will I," added Si.

"I shall remain here with Maybe Dixon," said Mark. "And I think the others ought to remain too. Those fellows may make a break for liberty when we least expect it."

"Mark is right," said Peckham. "They may be planning a break at this very minute."

"Let us arrange a signal," said Maybe Dixon. "If either party wants help, fire three shots in rapid succession."

So it was agreed; and a minute later the party to ascend the cliffs rode away, to where a narrow path led upward.

"Be careful here, boys," warned Andrew West, who was in the lead. "A tumble might hurt you a good deal."

The trail was by no means an easy one, and as they mounted higher and higher it seemed to grow more dangerous. A single slip of a horse's hoof and the rider would have been thrown down a distance of a hundred feet or more.

"This is the kind of traveling I don't like," remarked Si, as he looked down to the rocks below and shivered.

"Don't look down—keep your eyes on the trail," said Andrew West. "If you look down you may get dizzy and fall out of the saddle."

Near the top of the cliffs the way was worse than ever. The man passed in safety and then came Bob. Si's horse came to a halt.

"I can't make that!" cried the former farm lad, in dismay. "If the horse tries it we'll go over, sure!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Bob. "Wait a minute."

He dismounted and caught Si's horse by the bridle. Then the steed came on, slowly and cautiously; and in a few seconds more the danger was over.

Once on top of the cliffs the riding was easy. Andrew West located the point below which the cave was situated, and they rode around it in several directions.

"I see something like an opening," said Bob, a few minutes later. "I think—look!"

He pointed to a split in the rocks. A Mexican had just appeared. He did not see them and was looking towards a valley far back of the cave.

"Is he alone?" whispered Si.

"He seems to be."

"Let us try to capture him!"

The three dismounted and crept forward, screening themselves behind some pointed rocks. Soon they were within a dozen feet of the Mexican, who had stepped away from the opening, to get a better look at the valley.

"Now!" cried Andrew West and threw himself forward. The two boys followed, and in a twinkling the Mexican was thrown down, and then a fierce struggle ensued.

CHAPTER XXXIII

BROUGHT TO BAY—CONCLUSION

LEFT at the bottom of the cliffs, the others of the party drew a trifle closer to the mouth of the cave. They could see nobody, and wondered if it was possible that Sag Ruff and his associates in crime had managed in some way to get away.

"Perhaps they are miles away by this time," said Mark. "We really ought to go into the cave and make sure."

"And git shot for our pains," said Maybe Dixon. "None o' that in mine."

Nevertheless, as the moments went by, all grew more anxious, and at last, when it grew dark, they walked up within a hundred feet of the opening.

"Halt!" came in the voice of Sag Ruff, and he peered forth from behind a rock, pistol in hand.

"Come out of that!" cried Mark.

"We are not coming out," answered the gambler.

"You had better," said Maybe Dixon. "You ain't got no show to git away."

"Don't be so sure of that," came from Morgan Fitzsimmons, who was behind another rock, and also armed.

"We'll starve you out, if we can't do better," said one of the posse.

"You must give up to the law," said Peckham.

"He's an under-sheriff," said Maybe Dixon, but did not add from what State.

"An under-sheriff!" muttered Morgan Fitzsimmons, in dismay. "They are certainly after us hot-footed," he added, to Sag Ruff.

"Look here, if you are willing, maybe we will compromise," said Sag Ruff, after a long pause.

"We are not compromising with criminals," said Mark.

"You want your gold, don't you?"

"Yes, and we are bound to have it," put in Maybe Dixon.

"Unless you will compromise, you'll never see a speck of your dust," growled Sag Ruff.

"Nor a nugget neither," came from Morgan Fitzsimmons. "We have got the upper hand, and you know it."

"We are going to capture you and get the gold, too," said Mark.

"Perhaps you think we have the gold with us," said Morgan Fitzsimmons.

"You have," cried Maybe Dixon.

"Nothing of the kind. We hid it away, miles from here."

"Do you think he tells the truth?" asked Mark.

"I do not," answered Maybe Dixon. "I saw the bag several times as the rascals rode along. If they got rid of it at all it was just before they made for this cave."

"You'll give up that gold right enough," shouted one of the miners in the posse. "We'll make you tell where it is, even if it takes a rope to do it."

"That's the talk!" cried another. "Hanging is too good for such skunks!"

At the mention of hanging Morgan Fitzsimmons turned deathly pale.

"Will they dare to—to hang us?" he faltered.

"Like as not," said Sag Ruff. "To tell the truth, we are in a tight box."

"Perhaps they will let us go, if we give up all the gold."

"I don't think so. We have led them a long chase and they are mad."

"What shall we do?"

"Hold them at bay for the present, until those two greasers report. If we can get out the back way it will give us something of a chance to escape."

"But they can come in this way."

"Not if we let down those rocks," and Sag Ruff pointed to some rocks overhead that seemed to be loose and ready to fall.

"Can we do that?"

"I think so."

The two Mexicans had gone to the rear of the cave to investigate. The place was long and narrow, making several sharp turns. It was of solid rock, with an uneven flooring. In one spot some water trickled down the side and formed a pool below.

The horses were standing some distance back from the front entrance. They were all but exhausted and needed a long rest before they would be fit to proceed on another journey. Sag Ruff knew this, and it vexed him exceedingly.

"If you don't come out of that, we'll shoot at you," said Maybe Dixon, at last. "We are bound to get you, so you might as well give up now as later."

"Will you compromise?"

"No."

"Then we won't give up, and if you shoot, so will we," answered Sag Ruff.

He was growing reckless and was fit for any deed of daring. A shot rang out and the bullet whistled over his head. He fired two shots in return, one at Maybe Dixon and one at Mark.

Then came more shots from outside, but none of them took effect.

"Fire at them!" cried Sag Ruff to Morgan Fitzsimmons. "It's the only way we can keep them back."

The man from Philadelphia did as ordered, but his aim was poor and nobody was struck. The first bullets had grazed the coats of Maybe Dixon and Mark, but that was all.

Thinking it unsafe to remain near the mouth of the cave, our friends withdrew to the shelter of the rocks. Hardly had they done so when some shots rang out, coming from above the cave.

"They must have gone to the rear!" cried Mark. "What shall we do?"

"It may be a ruse," said Maybe Dixon. "That wasn't the signal for us!"

"Look! look!" called out Peckham.

He pointed to the mouth of the cave. A mass of rocks had fallen, all but closing up the opening.

"Wonder if that was done on purpose," said Mark. "It is funny they should fall just at this time!"

A moment later came three shots in rapid succession from the top of the cliffs.

"There's the signal!" cried the under-sheriff from Missouri.

"Come on!" returned Maybe Dixon. "Three of us can go up and the rest stay here," and off he sped, followed by Mark and Peckham.

How he got to the top of the cliffs Mark hardly knew. But once there he found a lively fight going on. The first Mexican had been captured by Andrew West, Si, and Bob, but the other fellow had fired on them, and now Sag Ruff and Morgan Fitzsimmons were in the mix-up, each on horseback.

"We must ride for it!" cried Sag Ruff, as the party from below came into view. "They are too many for us!"

"Ride it is," answered Morgan Fitzsimmons.

Both men struck their steeds fiercely, to force them into a gallop, and over the rocks they clattered. Maybe Dixon saw this, took aim at them, and fired four times. Mark also fired, and with a wild leap Sag Ruff's animal went down, throwing his rider over his head. The horse Morgan Fitzsimmons rode was also hit and ran wild, close to the edge of the rocks.

"Stop! Stop!" yelled the man from Philadelphia. "Stop! Whoa!" But the horse was too frightened to stop, and the next moment slipped and fell over the cliff, carrying the swindler with him.

Sag Ruff was partly stunned by his fall, but he

managed to get up on his knees, flourishing his pistol wildly.

"Don't touch me! Don't touch me!" he screamed, and then Mark swooped down upon him from behind, threw him over, and disarmed him. In a few seconds he was surrounded and made a prisoner. Then the posse turned on the second Mexican and he also was disarmed and his hands were bound tightly behind him.

In the meantime those at the foot of the cliff had seen the tumble taken by Morgan Fitzsimmons and his horse. They ran to the spot, to find the horse dead from a broken neck. Beside the animal lay the man from Philadelphia, bruised and unconscious.

"I don't think he will live," said one miner, after an examination. "If he does, he will be a cripple for life."

When the fight was over, all hands gathered at the foot of the cliff, close to what had been the mouth of the cave. The two Mexicans were bound hand to hand and ankle to ankle, so that to escape would be next to impossible. Sag Ruff was tied to a sharp rock and Morgan Fitzsimmons was placed on a horse blanket. The man from Philadelphia was still unconscious, but in a little while he gave a groan and opened his eyes.

"Don't hurt me!" he murmured. "Please

don't!" and then he relapsed into unconsciousness again.

"Poor fellow, I guess he has got all that is coming to him," said Si. "Hang me if I ain't kinder sorry for him, after all!"

"He has nobody to blame but himself," said Bob. "He chose to be a rascal and this is the result."

"I hope he lives," said Mark. "I want him to clear up that mystery of the office robbery."

Maybe Dixon and the boys were tremendously anxious concerning the missing nuggets and gold dust. They passed into the cave, through a narrow spot that was still open, and candles were lit, for it was now dark.

At first they found nothing, but presently discovered a trace of gold dust on the rocky flooring. The thin stream of gold led to one side of the cave, where was located a high and dry pocket.

"Hurrah! here is the bag!" shouted Mark, hauling it forth.

"Are the nuggets there?" asked Si, anxiously.

"Yes."

"An' the dust?" queried Maybe Dixon.

"Yes. One small bag is burst open. That left the trail on the floor."

"And a good thing for us," said Si. "We can

afford to lose a little dust, so long as we've found all the rest."

Going to a corner by themselves, they examined the contents of the bag with care. So far as they could remember, all of the nuggets were there, just as they had buried them. The gold dust was a little short, but not over two or three ounces.

"As Si says, that little don't count," said Maybe Dixon. "I am more than thankful we have all the rest."

"So say I," said Bob, and the other boys said the same.

It was a happy party that went to rest that night, close to the foot of the cliffs. Morgan Fitzsimmons was made as comfortable as possible, although some of the posse were in favor of hanging all four of the prisoners. Mark was utterly worn out and went to sleep quickly, despite the excitement through which he had passed.

The next morning Mark had an interview with Morgan Fitzsimmons. Like Soapy Gannon, the man from Philadelphia was utterly discouraged, and willing to do anything to make matters easy for himself.

"I need a doctor," said he. "I am all broke up."

"I'll get you a doctor, if you'll confess about

that affair at my step-father's office in Philadelphia," answered Mark.

"All right, I'll do it. One more crime on my head won't count, I reckon. I took the money, just as you suspected. You can write out a confession, and I'll sign it in the presence of witnesses. Please get a doctor as soon as you can, and—and don't let them ha—hang me!" he whispered, pleadingly.

"They are not going to hang you," answered Mark.

"Some of them spoke of doing it."

"We are going to turn you, Ruff, and the two Mexicans over to the law." And a week later this was done. Soapy Gannon was also placed under arrest, but was used as a witness against the others. Morgan Fitzsimmons went to a hospital for two months and was afterwards tried and sentenced to several years in prison, and a long term of imprisonment fell also to the share of Sag Ruff. The two Mexicans were sent to Mexico, where they had to answer to several grave charges, and were also placed in *durance vile*.

As soon as he had Morgan Fitzsimmons' confession in his possession, Mark had a duplicate made of it by a notary public and forwarded the same to his step-father. In return Jadell Powers sent a long letter, in which he begged Mark to

forgive him for suspecting the lad. He added that he was glad Mark was doing so well and that he could remain in California as long as he pleased.

"Maybe he was afraid you'd make it warm for him," suggested Maybe Dixon.

"Some day I am going back to Philadelphia and make him make a full settlement," answered Mark. "But I guess that time is a good way off yet."

The four partners had learned the lesson that it was not safe, in such a rough country, to keep much gold on hand, and Maybe Dixon and Si made a journey to Sacramento, where they placed the nuggets and most of the dust in the hands of a responsible banker, who gave them proper credit. Si sent ten thousand dollars to his folks, much to their unbounded amazement and gratification.

As soon as matters had quieted down a little the boys and Maybe Dixon set to work to clear away the rocks and dirt deposited over the little cavern by the landslide. This was hard labor, but when winter came the work was done, and during the cold weather they spent their time in enlarging the opening. They found quite a number of nuggets, and a "pay streak" that made their hearts leap with joy. The claim was properly staked out and recorded, and Andrew West took a claim on

one side of them, and Josiah Socket located on the other. Later on all of the claims were merged into one concern, the Golden Pick Mining Company, a corporation which became one of the best known in California.

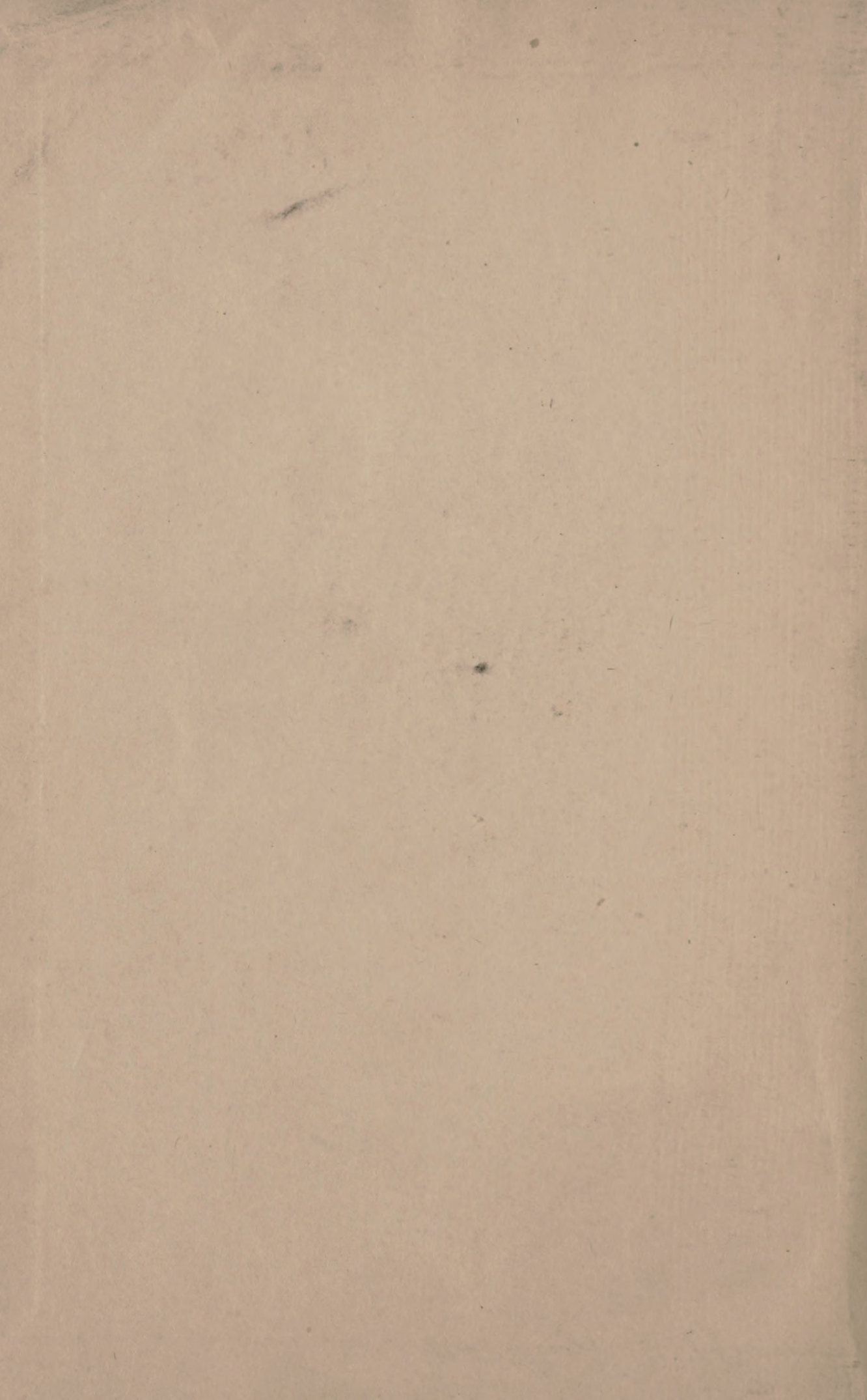
When Mark finally returned to Philadelphia his step-father treated him with every consideration. Mark was then of age and rich, and to Jadell Powers nothing had so much value as money.

"You deserve your success, my lad," said he. "I wish you well." And then and there all their quarrels were dropped and a just settlement made all around. Then Mark went back to California, to settle down. He married one of the Socket girls, a beautiful miss of seventeen, and led a happy and prosperous life. Si married Tillie West, and they made a most loving and affectionate couple. Bob remained a bachelor, and having acquired a good-sized fortune went to traveling, covering nearly every quarter of the globe.

THE END

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